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The yellow Viper .

F. Sidney .

CONTENTS

| CHAP. | PAGE |
|--------------------|------|
| PROLOGUE | 7 |

PART ONE

| | | |
|--|-----|------|
| I. FOUND DROWNED | 13 | lly |
| II. INTRODUCES THE ELDERS | 17 | he |
| III. A TEA-PARTY AT THE VICARAGE | 23 | ke |
| IV. DOWN POPLAR WAY | 28 | let |
| V. MR. POTTER | 31 | a |
| VI. THE DAGO | 33 | de- |
| VII. THE SPIDER'S WEB | 33 | with |
| VIII. AUBREY HEYLET TURNS | 4 | and |
| IX. CLOSING IN | 45 | one |
| X. THE LETTER | 49 | and |
| XI. MURDER. | 51 | avy |
| XII. BARBARA AND PETER | 54 | |
| XIII. THE IMPORTANCE OF GOLF | 60 | all |
| XIV. THE IMPORTANCE OF MR. OHNS | 66 | ng. |
| XV. A GLIMMER OF LIGHT | 69 | ue, |
| XVI. ANDREW GERSTEIN | 72 | ch |
| XVII. EXHUMATION | 78 | ri- |
| XVIII. THE FACE AT THE WINDOW | 83 | ere |
| XIX. THE WATCHER | 86 | of |
| XX. THE EVE OF THE TRIAL | 92 | by |
| XXI. PROSECUTION | 95 | was |
| XXII. THE DEFENCE | 104 | int. |
| XXIII. VERDICT | 109 | al, |
| XXIV. CONSEQUENCES | 114 | at- |
| XXV. INSPECTOR ROSE SEES POSSIBILITIES | 119 | ten |
| XXVI. THE SUPERFLUITY OF BARBARA. | 125 | ter |
| XXVII. THE TRAIL OF THE CHINAMAN | 133 | ro- |

| CHAP. | | PAGE |
|---------|--------------------------|------|
| XXVIII. | WESTWARD HO! | 139 |
| XXIX. | THE SNAKE PARK | 143 |

PART TWO

| | | |
|-------|---|-----|
| I. | FREEDOM | 153 |
| II. | LADY ANNE CARSTAIR | 161 |
| III. | BARBARA GETS ON | 166 |
| IV. | RUFUS JACKETT IS TEMPTED OF THE DEVIL | 174 |
| V. | PAWNS | 180 |
| VI. | THE WEB | 185 |
| VII. | MISS MUFFET | 193 |
| VIII. | THE VENERABLE ARCHDEACON | 198 |
| IX. | INSPECTOR ROSE LANDS A FISH | 206 |
| X. | A SENSE OF DIRECTION | 213 |
| XI. | HOCKING'S FARM | 220 |
| XII. | THE CRUCIAL TEST | 229 |
| XIII. | THE POISON RING | 238 |
| XIV. | BARBARA RETIRES | 245 |

*The Author wishes to state that all the
characters in this book are purely fictitious*

PROLOGUE

FER-DE-LANCE

THE atmosphere of the small cabaret in Quita dealt kindly with the two vivid charms of the girl pirouetting before the footlights. Through the floating haze of tobacco smoke she looked almost attractive, with her black hair, scarlet lips, red frock and bare legs. The saxophone gave a last despairing grunt, and she acknowledged a pandemonium of cat-calls, whistles and clapping hands with a curtsy which was a strange blend of timidity and defiance. They were a cosmopolitan crowd, but one must live, as Madame Julie always told her girls—and Madame Julie had a grasping temperament and a heavy hand.

The girl slipped from the stage and went down the hall to a corner table where two young men were drinking. Neither was English, but both could speak her native tongue, and for Jake Kemsy she entertained an affection which was in a different category from her other amorous experiences. Of his companion, she was frankly afraid; there was something that repelled her in the dark, semitic face of Reuben Vetter—and the repulsion was intensified by the fact that she knew that he loved her. She was no fool; it was obvious that from a worldly point of view Vetter was worth far more than his casual, happy-go-lucky companion. He would succeed in whatever he undertook, by fair means or foul. Women of her class quickly learn to judge the male character and develop an instinct which is in a measure protective.

vi

X

The instinct of Madeline Bax warned her to have nothing to do with Reuben Vetter.

Jake pulled up a chair as she approached, and filled a glass from the bottle of cheap red wine at his elbow.

"Well, kid," he said, with a slight nasal twang, "guess your show was durned fine!"

She pushed the chair away, with a laugh, and sat down on his knee. His companion nodded to the girl, gulped his wine and slouched away.

"Guess he just hates the sight of you," the man remarked. "He's not exactly prepossessing when he looks like that."

"He's jealous. Asked me to go with him last night and I refused. Who is he, Jake?"

"Just another of our gang at the Park—something wonnerful with the snakes he is . . . can do what he likes with them. Tickles their tails, and they lick his hand. Knows all about snake poison . . . helps the old man when Sendra Da is away."

The girl shuddered. "Well, he gives me the creeps. What's more I'm afraid of him, and, if I'm any judge, he doesn't exactly love you."

"Oh, Reub's all right. Just humpy about you. It plays the devil with a man when he's crazy about a girl."

"Crazy! That's it. That's what he looked like when I refused yesterday—as though he could have killed me."

"Have you got to dance again?"

"No. Let's get back, I've got some whisky."

They returned to the girl's room in the "Maison" of Madame Julie. She slipped off her cloak, threw herself down on the bed, and burst into tears.

"I can't stand it, Jake. The old hag will kill me," she sobbed. "She nearly did yesterday because I came home alone. Look!"

The man contemplated the vivid blue mark on

the white skin. "Cut it out, kid. Run away," he advised.

The girl shook her head. "I've done that once too often already. Ran away from the best home a girl could have, because I was a self-willed little devil. Now it's too late."

Jacob Kemsy walked slowly home. The splendour of a tropical night was all around him, the pale moon splashed the white road with pools of shadow; by the road side, in the dark undergrowth, the fireflies twinkled like fairy candles. But he was not in a responsive mood; man was too immanent in that god-forsaken place—and man was altogether vile. It was a natural paradise, and all around him were venomous beasts.

He hurried past the serpentario, past the paddock where the horses for the serum work were kept, to the secluded spot where his solitary bungalow stood. Thank God he had nothing to do with the snakes; the horses were his job—he could understand horses. The other beasts were all right for men like Vetter, he seemed to take a diabolical interest in the work and was absolutely fearless. It was a good thing there were such men, or the boss would have hard work to produce the serum, and in that snake-infested country it was needed.

He banged the door, and turned the key in the lock.

Why had he done that? He had never locked the door before. The girl must have frightened him. He struck a match and lit a candle. The feeble light seemed to intensify the gloom. He could see the bed, the plain deal table with the brandy bottle standing upon it, but everything else was veiled, mysterious.

How lonely it was!

He poured himself out a stiff peg of the crude spirit and gulped it down. What a fool he was! He could give notice and clear out of the place any day he liked.

The candle flickered . . . strange, for here was not

vi

X

a breath of air. He threw off his clothes, and got into bed, leaving the candle alight on the table. For some time he tossed uneasily in the oppressive heat, then dropped into a restless slumber.

What was that? Surely something was moving in the room!

He sat up, and a faint hiss, like the steam from a boiling kettle, came from close beside him in the bed. His body stiffened. Frozen with terror he watched the long, lithe, brown body uncoil itself, and, as it moved, its yellow belly glimmered in the candlelight. Two glittering eyes seemed to be fixed upon him. With grim fascination he noted the blunt snout and behind the eyes a black streak. Even *he* could recognize that snake. It reared its head, mouth open, poison fangs erect . . . it was going to strike.

With a cry of horror he thrust out his hands to ward off the blow, and like a whip the snake struck at the ball of his thumb. He seized the brute by the neck and jumped out of bed. In mad and impotent frenzy he crushed it to death, and trampled it beneath his bare feet . . . and all the time he knew that it was too late. He was a doomed man, he could feel a sharp pain where the fangs had entered. He gazed stupidly at the dead snake, then at the two small punctures at the base of his thumb. Serum! They kept serum for snake-bite. He staggered towards the door, but a hand thrust him back on the bed. He struggled impotently in the iron grasp of his powerful assailant. No," said Reuben Vetter. "No! I want to see how long it takes."

And so through the dark hours of the night they waited, the watcher and the watched.

"Water," he gasped. "Water . . . my mouth is dry." And he clutched at his throat as the breath whistled through his parched lips.

And the watcher poured out some water and handed it to his victim. In an access of frenzy the man struggled with his persecutor—no good . . . his strength was ebbing fast. He could not swallow, cramps racked his limbs.

At the first peep of dawn a merciful unconsciousness put an end to his sufferings.

Reuben Vetter gazed thoughtfully at the blotched, distorted face, then at his watch. "Three hours," he murmured. "*Three* hours!" and he shook his head.

PART ONE

CHAPTER I

FOUND DROWNED

MOORED to a disreputable Thames-side wharf was a craft which would have baffled an expert. It might have been a cross between a coal barge and a stean tug, or it might have been an obsolete steam ferry.

In the small cabin of this mongrel boat were two men. The door was fastened, the port was closed, and the place reeked of kippers, stale tobacco, beer, and paraffin. Sitting on a wooden box was a small man with protuberant eyes which gave him an expression of perpetual fright. He was carefully sorting the contents of a large sack which lay at his feet; and as he worked he whistled softly to himself. The heavy breathing of his companion, lying on the bunk, suggested that the liquor had been potent and plentiful.

As Mr. Cobb proceeded with his task, the mournful strains of the Old Hundredth played strange tricks; they syncopated, they tripped lightly from bar to bar until finally they took the semblance of a well-known foxtrot, and Mr. Cobb broke into song:

"My gel's got long 'air . . ."

His companion grunted and sat up.

"'Ere," he said aggressively, "'oo'sh knockin'?" The vocalist took no notice.

"Got long ginger 'air . . ."

"'Ere," repeated the other, "I shaid 'oo'sh knockin'? Thatsh wot I want 'er know."

"Dry up, Nobby," growled Mr. Cobb, "you're allus

vi

'earin' things . . . seein' 'em too. You'll see rats an' sar-pints one these 'ere days."

X

Mr. Nobby Parker lay down again and Mr. Cobb was about to resume his interrupted task when he heard it too——

Tip tap . . . tip tap.

He glanced apprehensively at the door, and again it came:

Tip tap . . . tip tap—clear, unmistakable, quite distinct from the lap of the water against the side of the boat. And it seemed to come from the small port-hole just over Nobby's head.

Tip tap . . .

The small man seized the hurricane lantern and stumbled out on deck.

"'Ere, don't do that—t' blinkin' 'ole's all dark."

But Mr. Cobb was gone and his heavy footsteps could be heard clumping about overhead. For a moment they ceased. Then Mr. Parker realized that his companion was returning in a hurry. There was a glint of light, and the meagre form of Mr. Cobb was dimly outlined in the narrow doorway.

"'Nobby, 'ole man," he whispered hoarsely, "Nobby, it's a corp!"

Nobby was too old a hand to allow a crisis to catch him off his balance. He tumbled off the bunk with surprising agility; staggered across the room, and plunged his head into a bucket of cold water, which represented their available supply. He came up dripping, but restored.

"Corps don't knock," he remarked.

Possibly the tongue of Mr. Cobb was cleaving to the roof of his mouth in the approved manner, for he made no reply. Instead, he poured some beer into a tin mug and swallowed it.

Tip tap . . . tip tap.

Fearfully they looked at one another; then with common consent they sought the fresh air.

The night was dark, the moon obscured by banks of rolling clouds which threatened rain. The wind blew from

the east in fitful gusts, which lashed the surface of the water and rocked the boats at their moorings. Mr. Cobb swung the lantern over the side, and clutched the arm of his unstable companion.

"There!" he exclaimed.

A white face with open, staring eyes gazed up at them from a mass of tangled cordage. One leg swung free, and, with each movement of the water, it tapped the side of the boat with a neat patent-leather boot.

"Wot did I tell yer?"

The big man started. He was trying to collect his scattered wits.

"Well, wot abaht it?"

Mr. Cobb thought of his sack and various other things.

"It's a corp," he said slowly, "a corp means perlice. We don't want no perishin' perlice muckin' arahnd 'ere."

For a moment Nobby brightened perceptibly.

"Wot abaht perks?" he asked hopefully.

The small man blinked and fingered his collar uneasily.

"To 'ell with perks," he said. "It's a corp—p'raps murder. It's the perks as the 'tecks'll be lookin' fer if it's murder."

Nobby scratched his head. He had even less reason to like the police than his companion. Reluctantly he nodded his agreement.

Ten minutes later the body resumed its interrupted journey down the river and on into the life of Barbara Elder, sixth year student at St. Swithin's Hospital.

The post-mortem room at St. Swithin's Hospital was constructed on modern lines—it represented the up-to-date methods of the great institution to which it belonged. At the present moment only one of the porcelain slabs was occupied.

The man in the white mackintosh apron tapped the body reflectively with a long knife which he was holding. A girl, sitting on a high-stool, was taking notes.

"Read the last sentence or two, Miss Elder," he said.

vi

X

"Black hair turning grey at the temples. Brown mole 1 x 0.5 centimetres above left eye. Puckered, pigmented scar 5 centimetres long over right tibia. Small bruise over head of left radius. 'Hammer' deformity of third toe of left foot."

"Yes . . . you might add 'general lividity with purple blotching over buttocks and dorsum of thorax. Well nourished.'"

The young pathologist turned to the mortuary attendant.

"Anything known about him yet, Albert?"

"Inspector Rose thinks they know who it is, sir. Some woman saw the body and identified it."

The pathologist proceeded with his investigation. He had almost finished when the door opened and there entered a small, fussy man, wearing a morning coat, striped trousers, and a monocle attached to a black ribbon. He had trim side whiskers and a double chin.

The young man looked up.

"Good evening, Sir Chorley," he said, without enthusiasm.

"Evenin'. They've asked me to keep an eye on this case."

"Oh, well! You'll find everything there." And he nodded to a wooden tray at the end of the table.

For some time the expert prodded about in the heap, then he examined the surface of the body.

"Been in the water a good time probably."

"A day or two I should think."

"Fairly straightforward case, as far as we are concerned," said the senior. And he went to the basin and proceeded to wash his hands.

He stood for a moment at the door. "Let me have your notes this evening, Crisp. I'll take the inquest."

And the door closed on Sir Chorley Bartle.

The young man looked at the girl on the stool.

"Fairly straightforward!" he muttered. "Well, if he thinks so, so much the better. It's his funeral not mine!"

"He's a conceited ass," she said.

There was a knock at the door, and a florid, powerfully

built man, dressed in an ill-fitting tweed suit, came into the room.

"I've just seen Sir Chorley," he said. "He tells me he has carried out the necessary examination."

"Yes, I'm just finishing off. What is it? Suicide?"

The stout man shrugged his shoulders.

"That's your job, not mine."

Inspector Rose was not in the habit of committing himself, but that was a question he would have given something to be able to answer. If it were suicide, there must be something uncanny in the air; for it would be the third successful blackmailer who had committed suicide in the short period of nine months. The police were not complaining; but it was, to say the least of it, unusual.

CHAPTER II

INTRODUCES THE ELDERS

THE Rev. George Elder was vicar of St. Jude's. He had recently moved up in the world from a suburban to a West End parish. He was red and well-polished like a ripe "Jonathan", about fifty years of age, bald, and wore gold-rimmed spectacles. A friend had once said that he resembled Mr. Pickwick, but he was wrong, for George Elder lacked geniality.

Everybody, however, agreed that Kate, his wife was charming. People often wondered what had induced her to marry the Rev. George, and sometimes she herself was tempted to wonder the same thing. Now, however, after twenty-five years of married life, she was getting used to it; but still he was an unsolved problem.

Had he been an ordinary sanctimonious humbug, it would have been a simple matter. But he was not a humbug, he was terribly in earnest, an eloquent preacher, a man of high ideals. Possibly it was the fault of his upbringing. After his parents died he had fallen into the clutches of an excellent

maiden aunt, who coddled him—woollen under-garments, properly tested drains, and the avoidance of infection played a prominent part in his upbringing. He had never had the nonsense knocked out of him at a decent public school; he had never played football; he had never rubbed shoulders with real men. He had simply basked—basked in the sunshine of an adoring aunt, and a respectful congregation of old ladies.

Barbara was their only child, and, as far as her father was concerned, she was a cuckoo in the nest. Nobody, and least of all George Elder, could understand why she had decided to be a doctor. Possibly, as she herself laughingly suggested, it was because the creator of Sherlock Holmes had been a doctor, and Watson was *such* a dear. More probably it was because of the opportunities the work afforded her of indulging that insatiable curiosity in human affairs, which had always been her predominant characteristic.

Peter Panton, her cousin, who was a budding solicitor, and had an unpretentious flat in Bayswater, hated the whole business, for he was in love with her. How could a girl, who knew all about anatomy and physiology, who regarded the heart as a mechanical device for pumping blood through a complicated system of elastic tubes, and judged its worth from a standpoint of mechanical efficiency—how could such a girl be responsive to the claims of affection? Why had nature endowed her with curly brown hair, provocative lips, and an adorable chin if it intended her for such work? He had struggled against it, but without avail.

As children they had been much together, for Peter was an orphan and Kate had mothered him. Love had come to him suddenly—as a matter of fact, Barbara had just expressed her contempt for his lack of enterprise by smiting him on the nose. She was about twelve years old at the time and he, conscience-ridden, had failed her in the matter of some forbidden fruit which she was anxious to obtain. She had never been an easy kid for a sobersides like Peter to understand, for she was a rebel.

One episode he never forgot. He heard one morning

sounds suggestive of corporal punishment proceeding from the Vicarage study. At lunch time he noticed two livid marks on the plump white hand of Uncle George; and suddenly it occurred to him that they exactly matched the two characteristic grooves which he had often noticed on the surface of green apples, tried and found wanting by his dainty cousin. "Yes," she had said later, dry-eyed and with a ring of triumph in her voice, "yes, I *bit* him." And Peter, who read his Bible regularly, thought of Jael, the wife of Heber, the Kenite.

But now Barbara had reached years of discretion, and hoped, within the next few weeks, to persuade the Examiners of the Conjoint Board that she was a fit and proper person to write a prescription and sign a death certificate.

It was between seven and eight o'clock in the evening, and Barbara was smoking a cigarette and sipping a cup of black coffee preparatory to retiring to her room for the final grind of the day. The Reverend George was sitting in a comfortable chair, reading the newspaper, and Kate was knitting. She was an expert knitter, for her husband expected her to be receptive when he was reading the newspaper. He liked the sound of his own voice, and he liked to express his views on current topics; but it was essential that his audience should be docile. Barbara was not docile.

"And yet there are people who deny the Divine intervention in human affairs!" he remarked.

Kate looked up. "What is the context?" she asked.

"This suicide case, my dear. It is obvious from the evidence at the inquest that the man was an unmitigated scoundrel. Like Judas, his conscience convicted him, and he went and . . . er . . . drowned himself."

"I gather that he had just made a successful scoop," Barbara interrupted. "It seems a strange time for repentance."

"Well, anyhow, he drowned himself," said her father irritably. He did not like to be interrupted.

"I am not so sure about that," rejoined the irrepressible Barbara.

"Well, Sir Chorley Bartle says he did."

"Sir Chorley!" she scoffed. "Good Lord!"

And she went upstairs to her room and took down Taylor's "Principles and Practice of Medical Jurisprudence" from the bookshelf.

George Elder sighed as he rose stiffly from his comfortable arm-chair. His daughter was a great puzzle to him—no sense of respect, no spirit of reverence, no humility. He had reason, also, to feel concerned about the welfare of his parish. Crime, like disease, tends to run in epidemics, and at the time there was undoubtedly an epidemic of blackmail in the West End. Blackmail differs from most other crimes in that it indicates moral laxity on both sides, otherwise it could never succeed. Moreover, its incidence can never be gauged by statistics—for every known case, there must be hundreds that are never heard of. George Elder had a simple mind, which accepted the obvious and was content not to explore the territory which lay beyond; but even he could not shut his eyes to the fact that a certain laxity of conduct was abroad, which encouraged this particular form of crime.

He looked at his watch—a gold, heavily inscribed testimonial from his last parish.

"We ought to be going, my dear," he said. "It is unseemly to . . . er . . . steeplechase to the Sanctuary. Also, it is bad for the digestion."

"I don't think I'll come to church to-night, George, I'm rather tired."

It needed a good deal of courage, for Kate knew that her husband did not approve of her feeling tired.

"Are you ill?" he asked, as though that were the only legitimate cause for fatigue.

"No, just tired."

The clergyman felt aggrieved. He knew that Kate had not been outside the house all day. So why should she be tired? He kissed her—a tepid kiss, well calculated to convey his disapproval—and departed.

George Elder was proud of his Wednesday evening

services, for they were well attended and, of course, weekday services are not fashionable now. Still he would miss Kate—she always discussed the sermon intelligently afterwards, and he liked to discuss his sermons with someone who could appreciate their merits.

When he had gone, Kate lay down on the sofa. It had been a tiring day, given up to housework, for, thanks to George's objection to an excellent maid, who did not wish to be confirmed, their staff had been temporarily reduced to one. She was sleepy, but could not get that suicide case out of her mind. Had it anything to do with that other? Then there were those rumours about Maimie Inglemere. People told Kate things—in confidence—always in confidence. What were the police doing? But, of course, in this type of case they were always hampered . . . it was so much easier to pay . . . at first. . . .

Her eyes closed and she fell asleep.

As the clock struck nine, she awoke with a start—Barbara was sitting on a chair beside the couch regarding her with critical eyes.

"Tired, little mother?"

"Just a wee bit."

The girl seized her hand and playfully felt her pulse.

"Ah," she said, "rather weak! you give in to pater far too much."

Kate sighed—she knew it was true, and in any case it was no use arguing with Barbara.

"Have a cup of tea?"

"I think I'll wait until your father gets back, dear. He likes a cup when he gets in."

The girl rang the bell.

"Tea, Louie," she said. "Yes, three cups and bring plenty of hot water."

She turned to her mother. "We can easily keep some for him, and it will do you good *now*."

When the vicar returned he was in excellent humour.

"Ah," he exclaimed—they both knew that he would

say it, he always did—"Ah! the cup that cheers but does not inebriate."

"As far as I can see," remarked Barbara, "it's just as bad. The only difference is that one drugs oneself with caffeine instead of alcohol. You possibly won't believe me, but you take over six grains of the drug every day of your life."

The vicar smiled tolerantly and turned to Kate.

"An excellent collection, my dear, and Henry Judson has given me a cheque for twenty-five pounds towards the new hall."

"He can afford it," said Barbara—Henry Judson was not one of her pets.

Kate intervened: "I'm rather sorry for him—to lose one's eyesight, even partially, must be terrible."

"One can always gossip," observed Barbara. "But he certainly got old Clay out of a bad mess; the worthy Canon should never have dabbled in shares . . . it's quite as bad as gambling."

She kissed her mother and made a hurried exit before her father could register a protest on behalf of his predecessor.

"I don't know what to make of that girl," he complained. "She always seems to have some grievance."

Kate knew, but it would have been no use explaining, for between George Elder and modern youth a great gulf was fixed. To Barbara humbug was an abomination, and apparently her father preached one thing and practised another—his sermons breathed the spirit of love and self-sacrifice, whilst at home he was selfish and inconsiderate. There was a rare sympathy between mother and daughter, and Kate understood—the Reverend George Elder had been weighed in the balance and found wanting.

"By the by," he said, "I've asked the Admiral to come to our small tea-party on Saturday afternoon. I want him to meet the Heylets."

Barbara had retired to her room. It was a curious mixture—half study, half bedroom. The dressing-table was

essentially feminine, so was the bed. The chairs and wardrobe were a compromise, but the massive writing-table was most emphatically masculine, and the book-case contained an assortment of medical text-books and detective stories. In the centre of the table was a human skull—the back teeth had been removed by a past proprietor, who was studying dentistry. Barbara regarded it with friendly interest.

"At times, Pompey," she remarked, "I am sorely tempted to pull somebody's nose."

She suited the action to the word.

"Bah!" she exclaimed, "you're all bone! not even gristle. How the devil can I twist a thing like that?"

Pompey grinned at her maliciously as she proceeded to undress. It was the last thing she saw as she switched off the light—Pompey grinning.

CHAPTER III

A TEA-PARTY AT THE VICARAGE

AUBREY HEYLET was a lazy man. He had been born in the lap of luxury, brought up in cotton wool; moreover he never allowed anything to upset him. With the advent of maturity he had looked around amongst the girls of his circle for a suitable wife—as far as possible she must be self-contained financially and otherwise. Helen Alton fulfilled the necessary requirements, so he had appropriated her. She was well endowed both physically and financially, and was accustomed to looking after herself.

The terms of servitude were not arduous; provided she remembered that his uncle was a peer of the realm, and took care not to let the family down, she might do pretty well as she liked. He trusted her; it would have been too much of an effort to do anything else. The arrangement had suited Helen excellently for a time. She was attractive

to men, and knew it; moreover, she loved admiration and was never averse to a mild flirtation.

She studied herself in the glass that Saturday afternoon and felt that she would do justice to her noble connections. She touched her nose lightly with the powder puff—it scarcely seemed necessary for she had a very nice nose—she was a “Gibson girl”, at least so her friends told her. Aubrey had approved of her frock. It must be quite out of the common for him to have noticed it at all.

She went into his study—a most inappropriate name for the room, but he insisted on it. He was buried in the depths of a leather arm-chair reading “Truth”.

“Aubrey,” she said sharply, “you promised to be ready at four o’clock.”

He flicked the ash from his cigar and glanced at the clock.

“Need I come?” he asked. “I don’t suppose anyone would notice, so long as you were there. Vicarage teas are rather out of my line.”

She stamped her foot petulantly.

“They arranged it for our benefit. If you had your way, we should never get to know anyone.”

“Well, hang it all, m’dear, why should we? Most people are infernal bores.”

“Always the same,” she protested. “I can’t even get you to come to dances with me now.”

“That doesn’t hurt you much. I’m a deplorable dancer, and you can always get dancing partners.”

He yawned and stretched himself.

“Well, if I must . . .”

He stood up and kissed her lightly on the forehead.

“You’re damned pretty, Helen,” he said, with momentary animation.

When he had gone, Helen rang the bell.

“We shall want the car at four-thirty, Potter.”

The man bowed.

“Yes, madam.”

“And, Potter, I shall be out this evening.”

“And the master, madam?”

"Oh, he will be in to dinner."

"Thank you, madam."

He went out, closing the door silently behind him.

Helen frowned. Why did she fear that man? He reminded her of a snake . . . watching . . . watching for a chance to strike. Aubrey refused to get rid of him, and in some things Aubrey could be very pig-headed—the man suited him and he hated changes. In any case it was unreasonable, as Potter was an excellent butler, and had been with the Heylet family for several years.

The tea-party was a select one—"Every one hand-picked," as Barbara irreverently put it. The Heylets would make a valuable addition to the Rev. George Elder's collection, and he wanted them to meet the just right people.

"Very well connected, and money on both sides," as he confided in an undertone to Henry Judson, just before they arrived. And Judson, who also had the interests of the church at heart, sympathized with the Vicar's feelings on the subject.

"Nephew of Lord Bingley," he said. "Then I expect the family pride is well developed. They used to say of the Bingleys that the pride was about all they had left after the Liberator smash, but I suppose the family finances have recovered."

Lady Ballis was coming. Admiral Fustian-Hall, the Hepplewhites, the Citrons and the Kings. Kate had a wonderful way of persuading people to come to her small gatherings, for which the Reverend George generally took the credit.

Barbara was helping Kate. She never let her mother down, and really such gatherings were rather amusing; they encouraged people to show off their little tricks and artificialities. She already knew all about Lady Ballis's Rolls-Royce, a good deal about Admiral Fustian-Hall's liver, quite enough about Judson's philanthropy, Mr. Hepplewhite's defunct wife, and the rivalry between the Citrons

and the Kings. But she wanted to meet the Heylets, and especially Helen Heylet.

For a considerable time she was enmeshed in Admiral Fustian-Hall's liver. The opportunity was too good for the worthy old seadog to miss—to be able to tell a pretty girl all about his liver, without any sense of impropriety, seemed almost too good to be true. As a matter of fact, Barbara loved to talk to him, for he had seen a great deal of the world and had a wonderful collection of curios—his house was a perfect museum.

In the meanwhile, Miss Citron had outwitted Mrs. King and taken possession of Aubrey Heylet. She had once met Lord Bingley at a charity bazaar, and a vivid imagination had considerably strengthened the acquaintanceship. The Vicar had introduced Mrs. Heylet to Henry Judson, but apparently the latter found his companion difficult to understand. With a troubled expression he peered at her through his heavy, smoked glasses.

"You evidently hold modern views with regard to freedom," he said. "Don't you think that in some ways it is rather overdone? Children, for instance, are losing all respect for their parents."

Helen Heylet laughed.

"Merely a new morality, a new conception of honesty. They are forgetting how to be prigs and humbugs. Childish individuality suffered eclipse beneath the cloak of Victorian respectability."

Barbara took the cup from her hand. She had heard the last sentence and agreed, for she had always been a rebel. She thought that Helen Heylet must be rather nice, at any rate a refreshing change after some of the others. Apparently Helen had kept her independence in spite of being married. She would like to ask her about that; it was rather important to . . . Peter.

Lady Ballis turned to Fustian-Hall.

"I hear Lady Inglemere is back," she remarked.

The Admiral cleared his throat—it was a sure sign that the subject did not please him.

"Funny business," added her Ladyship as a filip to the sailor's conversational powers.

"Yes . . . er . . . hrumph . . . very peculiar . . . hrumph . . ."

Lady Ballis was getting annoyed, for she was certain that he knew far more than she did about Lady Inglemere.

"They say that she is wearing paste now," she volunteered.

"And very sensible too! Those diamonds of hers are far safer in the bank."

"Yes, but supposing they are not in the bank!"

The Admiral cleared his throat, levered himself out of his chair and proceeded to hand bread and butter and cake without discrimination.

"Do take some, Miss Barbara," he said pathetically after four refusals. From which it may be gathered that the worthy Admiral did not gossip about his friends—not that Lady Inglemere was exactly a friend, but she had eaten his salt.

Aubrey Heylet was frankly bored. Miss Citron had failed to charm, and she knew it—Aubrey had a way of letting people find out little things like that. She had neatly transferred him to Mrs. King. For a few moments he had hopes of amusement, for she began to talk about Miss Citron. The lady, however, was too depressed to be amusing. She could only abuse her rival in a minor key, and her grievances were church trivialities—the decoration of the pulpit, the right to assist at the Vicarage stall at the annual bazaar. Aubrey Heylet cared for none of these things. He fidgeted and registered signs of distress to his wife, who was engaged in animated conversation with a tall, handsome girl, apparently their host's daughter, though she did not bear the ecclesiastical stamp.

Barbara stooped down.

"Your husband wants to go, he's bored stiff, and I don't blame him."

Helen smiled, she could understand this sort of girl.

"I hope we shall see something of each other. You know I am psychic, people repel and attract me."

For a moment her eyes rested on Henry Judson, who was caressing Kate's hand prior to departure.

"A damned dull affair, m' dear," said Aubrey Heylet, as they drove away. But she did not altogether agree with him.

CHAPTER IV

DOWN POPLAR WAY

IN a narrow street in the Poplar district two urchins were fighting—one was big, the other small. A "torf" had just come down the street, a "torf" looking so well pleased with himself that the younger boy had solicited alms by the simple expedient of turning cart-wheels in the gutter. A vagabond experience had taught the child a wise discrimination—he received sixpence.

The older boy had watched proceedings with an interest natural to one brought up on communistic principles. He was now claiming a share of the profits. The small boy was game, but avoirdupois was against him; a bloody nose was all the reward he received for upholding the rights of capital. The big boy slouched away with the sixpence whilst his small companion sat on the kerb and howled miserably.

The windows of the house behind him were good; the noise did not penetrate the stillness of the small room on the first floor. The man, sitting at the table, pressed a small white knob. Had he rubbed Aladdin's lamp the response could not have been more prompt—a small, wizened Chinaman stood bowing before him.

"Is he here?" The Oriental bowed assent.
"I will see him in five minutes."

Silently the man placed a chair in front of the table, and turned the shaded lamp so that its light fell upon the chair. He glanced at his master, and went as silently as he had come.

There was something fateful about the man who sat awaiting his visitor in the semi-darkness. Possibly it was

the setting—just as a forest pool may look fateful in the sombre twilight. The regular features, olive complexion, and piercing, dark eyes conveyed no message of warning; it was more the suggestion of something hidden behind a mask—some latent power which, at any moment, might develop into something terrible.

The door opened and a young man was shown in. He threw a small packet on to the desk and sat down.

"She won't stand much more, padre," [he said. "It's a nicely adjusted balance between two evils, and she is beginning to wish she had confessed in the first instance."

The other smiled.

"One must turn the screw very gradually," he said. "It is always wise to go easy at first. They can never turn back once they have started."

He opened a neat leather case, which was inside the parcel, and gazed at the contents.

"So," he hissed softly. "So, you brought it off after all."

He opened a drawer and took out a wad of notes.

"As arranged," he said. "You will find them O.K." And he handed them across the table. "She may stand a bit more squeezing . . . if not . . . there are plenty of others. Let me know."

He pressed the button and the Chinaman appeared.

The young man leapt from his seat.

"My God, padre, how the devil did the fellow get here?"

For a moment the mask relaxed.

"Chu Ling is never far away," he said. "I take no risks."

The door closed and once more he took up the case and opened it.

Then he turned the lamp round and the jewels sparkled in the light—it had been a good day, and they would be easy to dispose of. He walked down the room, and pressed his finger on a small carved flower in the wainscot. Then he slid back a panel, opened a safe concealed behind it and deposited the jewels within.

He took up the mouthpiece of a speaking tube which projected from the wall.

"When the other comes, show him up, but ring first," he said.

He opened a drawer, took out a large ledger, and proceeded to study it. At the top of each page was a name, below were cuttings from newspapers and typed memoranda carefully pasted in so as to overlap one another. He consulted the index and turned to page 65. Then he referred to a copy of "Who's Who", which stood on the table beside him. "Yes," he said softly to himself—as though the matter in hand had been finally settled.

A bell tinkled. He closed the ledger, put it back in the drawer, and turned the lamp towards the chair in front of him.

The youth who came in was obviously a Jew. He glanced at the chair and moved it out of the circle of light.

"Excuse me," he said. "A glare troubles my eyes."

The man behind the table looked at him but said nothing. It was as though he scented danger. For some time there was silence—almost as though a struggle were going on between the wills of the two men.

The youth spoke first.

"This house is not easy to find," he said.

"Perhaps the Poplar district is not familiar to you."

"It's so infernally dark down by the river and the passage outside . . . suggests murder and sudden death."

"Yes. The police leave us alone down here."

"Have you anything for me?"

"Possibly. Can you dance?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

The other nodded.

"Good." And he handed a slip of paper to his visitor. "That is the name. An introduction will be arranged. Further details will be given you later on. The terms of the agreement between ourselves I believe you already know."

"Yes. Do I have to sign anything?"

The eyes glittered in the mask-like face.

"No," he said. "Nobody has ever played me false and lived to tell the tale."

CHAPTER V

MR. POTTER

THE pantry in the Heylets' house looked very snug. Mr. Potter adjusted his glasses and contemplated the shining teapot—he was proud of his silver and the work had been well done. He removed his pince-nez and his eyes encountered a pair of trim ankles encased in black silk stockings; they travelled up the straight line of the shins until they came to two shapely knees.

The girl tugged at her brief skirts in an access of belated modesty.

"You shouldn't wear 'em so short, Bessie," he admonished.

"It's this chair," she objected, "it's too low."

Potter was a connoisseur; he appreciated nice things—dainty china, hothouse flowers, good furniture, antique silver, pretty girls. He would probably have claimed that he was a man of taste, and nobody would have been inclined to dispute it. He had a manner which carried conviction, and his dark, regular features and grizzled hair did not lack distinction.

In his own department he was a martinet. It was only with Bessie Chadnage, Mrs. Heylet's maid, that he allowed himself to relax, for Bessie was a gossip and Mr. Potter was inquisitive.

The man leant back in his chair and contemplated his companion—she made quite a pleasing picture.

"Oh, you women!" he said. "I sometimes wonder what you will be doing next. There's the mistress—smokes cigarettes, always out, belongs to a club, has a dancing partner of her own, and consults a lady doctor."

"Yes, *she's* a hot 'un, too, is Dr. Barbara! Encourages the missus . . . not that I blames her. Our Aubrey's a cold fish and deserves anything he gets. He'll get it too one of these days. That Dago was here again last night—those filthy Russian cigarette ends all over the shop. And the cushions! lor' Mr. Potter, wonderful eloquent cushions can be to be sure!"

"You've a nasty little Victorian mind, Miss Bessie. For all your short skirts you haven't caught the modern spirit—people don't come croppers nowadays, they are far too clever. He's only a Jew boy, ten years younger than she is, and the master rather encourages him."

"Yes. Because he's too lazy to go out with her. He loathes dances and thinks it's safe to encourage a boy. But I knows what I knows, Mr. Potter, an' there's trouble brewing. Have you ever noticed the way that Dago looks at her?"

"The mistress realizes what is due to her position. There are some things he'd never forgive for all his complacency, and she knows it. I once saw him punish a dog which had bitten him . . . it wasn't nice . . . they had to kill the dog."

"Lor', Mr. Potter!"

"Yes. Still waters run deep and he's got a temper. No . . . she wouldn't dare."

"P'raps she wouldn't be able to help herself. She seems sort of lost when that Dago's about."

The butler drew the girl towards him, and she responded with a kiss.

"You're a naughty old thing," she said.

But for the moment he was not interested in Bessie, he was trying to coax information out of her; he would have liked some more details. The butler sees a great deal but the lady's maid infinitely more, and there were several things that he wanted cleared up, for the situation was becoming distinctly interesting.

"Let me see," he said reflectively. "How long has Paul Marks known her?"

"Six months," the girl answered promptly. "He met her at the Inglermes' dance last June."

"I wonder how her ladyship got to know him."

But at that moment the bell rang and Bessie hurried upstairs.

CHAPTER VI

THE DAGO

At two o'clock Helen Heylet let herself in with a latchkey. She glanced at the hat-stand reflectively for a moment, and then went to the door again.

"Come in, Paul, and have a drink. Aubrey must have retired to roost long ago."

The youth entered and placed his hat and coat on a chair in the hall. She switched on the light in the library and held open the door for him.

"Topping dance, Paul," she said. "We are good partners. That last waltz was divine."

"Yes, an excellent dance, Helen. We are well matched." And he flashed a glance at her which filled her with a vague alarm.

"Don't, Paul!" she exclaimed. "Sometimes I think that you hypnotize me with those dark eyes of yours."

He laughed. "Do you remember that evening at the Gaskells'?"

She shuddered. "It was horrible, Paul, and you promised never to do it again."

"It was only fun. It is impossible to do anything unless you are willing, unless you submit your will to mine. So it is entirely under your own control . . . But, all the same, you would make an excellent medium."

His words seemed to reassure her.

"Give me a whisky and soda, and help yourself. You are forgiven, provided you promise never to try to persuade me to do it again. It's horrid to yield up one's individuality."

"Merely parlour tricks. But, by Jove, you *were* under

control! I believe you would have jumped out of the window if I had willed you to do it."

He laughed carelessly, but the dark eyes, in their pale setting, flashed with a menacing light that betrayed him.

She threw herself wearily down on the couch and the man poured out a liberal supply of whisky and splashed in some soda.

"Drink this, Helen. I expect you are tired. We danced practically the whole evening."

A cushion slipped to the floor. He restored it to its place and, for a moment, his hand rested on her bare shoulder. She manifested neither pleasure nor repulsion, but she did not resist the familiarity.

"May I smoke?" he asked.

"Of course."

He sat on the couch at her feet.

"Are you happy, Helen?"

"Yes. I chose my own life, and Aubrey gives me absolute freedom."

His hand caressed her ankle and passed lightly over her shapely leg.

"I think you are fond of me, Helen," he said. "But affection is against your principles, it hampers freedom. Yet, in some forms of love, we have the very essence of freedom."

Her eyes were fixed on his and she was breathing quickly, as though she had been running.

"Paul!" she whispered in terror. "Paul, don't!"

But the dark eyes of the man did not move, and the monotonous movement of the hand continued.

The woman closed her eyes.

The clock on the mantelpiece chimed the hour, and, with a start, he looked round.

"What a beautiful tone!" he exclaimed. "I love music—the harmony, the rhythm. You love music too. That is why we dance so well together."

She opened her eyes and her face relaxed, as though some spell had been broken.

"Yes," she agreed, "it is one of the things most worth living for."

"You must come to my flat one evening and hear me play. I have a perfect Bechstein and I want you to hear it."

He stretched himself. "I'm a bit tired myself—better be going. Good-night, Helen."

She fastened the front door after him and returned to the library.

"Ugh! How cold it is!"

She wrapped her fur coat round her shoulders and went upstairs.

At eleven o'clock the following morning Barbara Elder came to see Helen. She was shown up to the bedroom.

"Hello, Helen! Still in bed! Sick or lazy?"

"A bit of both, old dear, but it's mental rather than physical."

"Too much dissipation probably. You may be able to burn the candle at both ends, but you can't burn it in the middle as well. Dancing is all right as a relaxation, but it doesn't do to make a business of it. Now, I'm going to annoy you. I dislike that Dago, and I don't trust him."

The other flushed. "If we weren't such pals I should be angry with you, Bab. Paul isn't a Dago, and you have always been prejudiced."

"Well, perhaps it wasn't a very polite way of putting it, but *do* be careful, Helen. You know practically nothing about the man except that he got to know Lady Inglemere in Paris, and is popular with her set. He may be anything. I always distrust a man with regular features, a creamy complexion, and black hair. He's too infernally good-looking and plausible."

"You should dance with him, Bab. I never realized before how badly the average man dances—too stiff, too self-conscious, too athletic, too peripatetic, too casual; you meet them all, but very rarely a Paul Marks. To dance with him is to touch perfection. One forgets . . . the floor

... the band . . . everything. It is like floating through space on a moonbeam."

Barbara felt her pulse.

"Yes," she said, "bromide and valerian are clearly indicated. So Aubrey lets you go out at all hours of the day and night with a man who makes you feel like that!"

"There's no question of permission. He gives me freedom in exchange for toleration—there are times when he needs a good deal of tolerating. He's too selfish even to make a decent lover."

"I didn't say it was your fault, my dear. I know it isn't. I only said, 'Be careful.'"

That evening Barbara went to see Peter. He was a solemn old chap, but very level-headed, and crammed with legal knowledge; she could always count on him in an emergency. She found him, as usual, immersed in legal documents. The room was like the engine-room of a liner; his coat was lying on the ground by his side, and his hair looked as though he had been dragged through a bush backwards.

He jumped up, pushed forward a chair, and produced a ring from his pocket.

"Will you marry me, Babs?" he asked.

It was his customary greeting, almost a formality.

"Don't be an ass, Peter," she said. "I'm serious this evening. I want to talk about Helen."

"But, my dear, I'm serious too. Like Jacob—or was it Esau?—I've done my bit for seven long years, and now—being a lawyer—I expect Laban to stick to his bargain. I believe I first proposed when you were just seventeen."

"There is no bargain, and there never has been. You know perfectly well that I should never tolerate any form of legal restraint, matrimonial or otherwise."

He sighed, and put the ring back in his pocket. "Very well. Let's hear your trouble."

And she told him all she knew about the Dago.

"It seems to me," he said, "that it is a question more

for the husband. It doesn't do to meddle with other people's domestic affairs."

"Husband!" she said contemptuously. "He's only half a man. He always imagines he's ill; now he thinks his heart is wrong! The other day she got me to examine him, and the process failed to send his pulse rate up five beats! Yet, you consider me fairly attractive, don't you?"

"Your morals are deplorable," said Peter. "I don't like girls messing men about professionally."

"Well, what do you advise about Helen?" she asked.

"I don't know. You are so jolly inconsistent. You are always advocating 'freedom'—whatever that may mean—and when you see the inevitable result you get the wind up and come to a mere man for help. You haven't given me any reasonable explanation for your fears except that you have an intuitive dislike of the man. Probably he's a most respectable individual and teaches in a Sunday-school in his spare moments."

She stamped her foot. "Peter, there are times when I almost hate you!"

He reduced his hair to a state of even greater chaos.

"What do you expect me to do?" he asked. "I can't very well put a detective on his track because you don't like the shape of his nose. As a matter of fact, I entirely agree with you. But it seems to me that, failing the husband, you are the best person to tackle the problem, by using your influence with the lady. Of course, if we could find out anything against the Dago, something might be done."

"That's it," she said. "Can't you make some inquiries?"

He chuckled. "It's rather funny. Isn't it?"

"What?"

"Holmes coming to Watson for advice. My fee, my dear Holmes, is one kiss."

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CHAPTER VII

THE SPIDER'S WEB

MRS. BLOGGS "obliged" for Mr. Paul Marks, and also for one or two others who lived in that warren of expensive flats. As was her custom, at ten o'clock she removed the melancholy débris of his morning repast, made up the fire, and retired to the small kitchen to wash up—it was a room which scarcely seemed constructed for a lady of her dimensions.

Paul Marks watched her close the door, then he glanced at a card which he was holding:—

| | |
|--------------|----------|
| Lady Ballis | |
| At Home | |
| January 22nd | 10.0—2.0 |
| Dancing | R.S.V.P. |

The floor would be overcrowded, and Helen would want to leave early.

He put the card back on the mantelpiece and lit a cigarette. The sun was shining into the room and a canary, in its gilded cage by the window, was singing gaily. He pulled down the blind, for he did not want to be distracted. But still the bird chirruped. He fetched a cover and placed it neatly over the cage. Then he threw himself down on the large chesterfield and proceeded to think.

The flat was an expensive one, and he had taken it furnished. It was the sort of flat that inspires confidence in the financial stability of its occupant—the soft pile carpet, the Bechstein grand piano, the Chippendale furniture, luxurious arm-chairs, bric-à-brac and choice paintings. He glanced at a large picture hanging at the end of the room, and, for a moment, he frowned in perplexity. In these days well-to-do people did not take pictures too seriously . . . but . . .

And the subject was a familiar one; but the artist had introduced a spirit of realism, almost a note of warning, which

made Paul Marks doubtful of its effect upon his visitors. He was a great believer in the power of suggestion, and there was certainly something suggestive about that picture. The central figure was a gigantic negro reclining on an ornate divan. In his grasp a terrified white girl was struggling. An aged Jew, richly apparessed, was leaving the tent; and behind him a slave carried two magnificent tusks, one over each shoulder.

The question the youth could not decide was whether such a picture would be helpful or the reverse—in the crude daylight certainly the reverse . . . but at night, with subdued artificial lighting, the effect might be different.

He decided in favour of the picture.

There was a decorative Japanese screen standing in one corner of the room, ornamented with birds and elaborately carved. He carefully measured the distance between the couch and the screen; and a Chinese god, standing by the side, leered at him with infinite understanding. He walked to the couch and pushed it a foot nearer the screen. Then he measured the distance again. He pressed something fixed at the end of the couch. There was a sharp click. He went to the piano and played the Rachmaninoff Prélude, and he played it superbly.

At lunch time he received a note from Helen Heylet:

DEAR PAUL,

I am sorry to say that I shall not be able to be at Lady Ballis's dance this evening. As a matter of fact, I am giving up dancing for a time on the advice of my doctor.

Yours sincerely,

HELEN HEYLET.

Paul Marks tore the letter into tiny pieces, and threw them into the wastepaper basket. Then he pushed the couch back to its original position and went behind the screen.

It was the following afternoon, and Marks was experiencing an unusual sensation—he was uncomfortable. He glanced around the bare, carpetless room with closed shutters. Why was the man keeping him waiting? He had come by

appointment. Then there was the Chinaman—a sinister figure, a man with silent ways and a secretive manner. How was it that he had appeared on the doorstep just at that moment? And where had he come from? Had he been following him? There was something uncanny about the whole business.

Upstairs the man at the desk was studying a short letter which lay before him:

DEAR SIR,

The goods you require are difficult to obtain at the present time. The market is very sensitive, and I should like to discuss the matter further with you at your convenience.

Yours faithfully,

PELLEW & JAMES.

He pressed the button. Chu Ling appeared.

"He came alone? You followed him the whole way from his flat?"

The Oriental bowed.

"Good, I will see him now."

The door opened and Paul Marks came in. He fidgeted uneasily; the silence and mystery vaguely alarmed him. He felt like a novice in the presence of a master mind.

"So," the man hissed. "You have frightened her!"

"I have been very careful."

"Still, she is frightened. Your letter says so. The pearls are worth twenty thousand pounds at least. Too good to give up without a struggle. I will see what can be done about it."

"Would she pay the price?"

"He'd divorce her. She wouldn't face that for a necklace."

"She refuses to see me. Someone must have prejudiced her."

"I think I can manage to adjust matters."

The other moved restlessly in his seat.

"Twenty thousand pounds is a lot of money," he ventured. "You did not tell me *that* when we made arrangements."

"That can be discussed later. Now you have only to wait—probably she will write to you again."

After his visitor had departed he sat for some time meditating. Two things were evident—it was not going to be as easy as he had thought, and he could not trust Paul Marks to carry out his share of the bargain.

CHAPTER VIII

AUBREY HEYLET TURNS

THE Reverend George Elder had just finished shaving. He passed his hand reflectively over his chin, first down—that was all right—then up—ump! . . . he must have that razor set. A perfect shave was one of the canons of his religion; he had never yielded to the modern craze for a go-as-you-please shave with a safety razor. Kate was doing her hair. He regarded her with appreciation—her arms were very pretty, especially when she raised them like that. "I think that I shall have to say something to Heylet about it," he remarked. He always broke into his own thoughts regardless of the fact that he was frequently quite unintelligible to his audience. On this occasion Kate was not absolutely honest, for she knew perfectly well what he was referring to, but feigned ignorance. She gave another twist to her luxuriant hair and inserted a couple of hairpins. The Reverend George objected to shorn heads for women, and Kate agreed with him.

"About what?" she asked, with an air of innocence.

"My dear Kate, everybody is talking about it. Even the servants are gossiping. I refer to Helen Heylet and Paul Marks."

"But I thought Barbara said she had stopped dancing for a time. It was their dancing so much together that everybody was talking about."

"I have it in confidence, but on the highest authority, that she still meets the man—that she goes to his flat."

"Probably idle gossip, dear."

The Reverend George was hurt. "I have said, Kate, that I have it on the very best authority. I never listen to gossip."

"Don't you think that it would be better to leave it alone—for the time being at any rate?"

"The souls in this parish have been committed to my charge and I should be guilty of a gross neglect of duty. Aubrey Heylet is a godless young man, and a little plain speaking will do him no harm—no harm at all."

Kate completed her toilette in silence. She knew it was no use arguing with her husband when he adopted that tone. But she was not happy about it, for Kate Elder understood the modern woman, and knew that she was intolerant of reproof or outside interference. It might be bitterly resented and do more harm than good. The Heylets had not fallen to the wiles of the vicar, and she had a shrewd suspicion that he rather relished the idea of a little seasonable reproof. The fact that Barbara had been admitted to an intimacy which he could not share rather rankled!

Aubrey Heylet put down the book he was reading and frowned at Potter.

"I'm very busy," he said. "Can't he leave a message?"

"He says that it is very important, sir."

Apparently it would be less bother to see the Vicar than to make the effort necessary to get rid of him.

"Very well," he said ungraciously, "I will see him."

The Vicar greeted him genially. He looked very sleek and well nourished. Aubrey detested sleekness. For some time general topics were discussed, but it was obvious that Elder was merely feeling his way tactfully towards the object of his visit. Aubrey let him do most of the talking; there was no need for him to trouble—it was the Vicar's job in life to talk and he seemed to enjoy it.

"A parish, Mr. Heylet, is a miniature cosmos. It is a collection of individuals, mutually dependent on one another for moral support and refreshment. But it has the

drawbacks incidental to such a close association. People take a morbid interest in each other's affairs—they gossip."

Heylet looked up.

"It is a matter that interests me very little," he said.

"Perhaps it would be well if you took a little more interest in it!" the clergyman replied with asperity. "The bonds of matrimony involve certain responsibilities, and people are talking about your wife."

"I do not care to discuss my wife behind her back."

The Vicar took out a large white handkerchief and mopped his forehead. It was not going to be quite as simple as he had imagined.

"It is obviously malicious," he continued, "but I thought that you ought to know, in view of your high social position, so that you might be able . . . er . . . to deal with it . . . er . . . adequately. I have always been a great admirer of the Bingley family."

Aubrey Heylet moved uneasily in his chair, and the Vicar knew that he had scored a point.

"With our modern ideas of freedom," he went on, "the most harmless action may be . . . er . . . misconstrued. Perhaps it was unwise of Mrs. Heylet to visit his flat."

"Look here, Mr. Elder"—obviously Heylet was roused—"you have either said too little or too much. Will you be good enough to tell me plainly the object of your visit?"

The vicar passed his tongue over his dry lips.

"People say that Mrs. Heylet is taking too much interest in her dancing partner, Paul Marks."

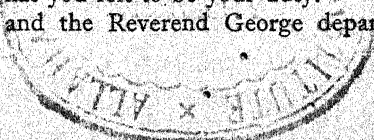
"And you listen to such tittle-tattle?"

"It is my duty to interest myself in the moral conduct of those committed to my charge. Mrs. Heylet is a member of my congregation and an intimate friend of my daughter."

For a moment the other hesitated. Then he got up and held out his hand:

"Good-bye, Mr. Elder," he said, "and thank you. You have probably done what you felt to be your duty."

He rang the bell, and the Reverend George departed with alacrity.



Helen was sitting in her room when her husband came in. She looked up in surprise for he rarely invaded her domain.

"I want to have a chat with you," he said.

"Why not?" And she pointed to an arm-chair.

He walked to the fireplace and stood with his elbows resting on the mantelpiece.

"What's all this gossip about, Helen?"

"Don't ask me riddles, Aubrey, they are tiresome things."

"I'm not amusing myself," he said, shortly.

"Well then, please be more explicit."

"People are associating your name . . . *our* name—with that of Paul Marks."

She yawned discreetly. "Really, Aubrey, you have not taken, I hope, to listening to kitchen gossip at your time of life. And surely you are not becoming jealous; that would be very fatiguing."

The man controlled himself with an effort.

"Helen, I am serious, for it is a serious matter—my wife must not be exposed to vulgar gossip . . . That has always been understood."

"Taken for granted you mean. A part of the unwritten contract between two loving hearts. My dear Aubrey, do you imagine that everybody is cast in your own particular mould of egotism? I'll grant, if you like, that we are all more or less egotists, but we do not all manifest it in the same way. Your particular type is egocentric, mine is expansive. You have realized this and, to save yourself trouble, have allowed me to . . . expand. Now, apparently, you regret the liberty you have given me."

"There are limits. It is quite another matter going to his flat at night."

"What do you mean? Who has told you that I go to his flat?"

"That is immaterial. Once and for all, Helen, I will not have it."

She sprang to her feet. "*You!*" she said. "*You!* What claim have you upon me—a husband too lazy, too self-

centred, even to claim the elementary rights of a husband! Too wrapped up in yourself even to contemplate the possibility of revolt from such a travesty."

He stood by her writing-table and his face was white and set.

"As long as you bear my name you will conform to my standards."

For a moment his hand closed on a small jewelled stiletto which was lying on the table. He had given it to her during their honeymoon in Italy, and she used it as a paper-knife.

"I am a dangerous man to play with, Helen."

She laughed. "My dear Aubrey, don't be melo'dramatic. For the sake of peace and quietude you gave me freedom. I am not such a fool as to lose my head, but I shall certainly not give up Paul Marks because a few chattering fools choose to talk about us."

He turned towards the door. "If you are wise you will have nothing more to do with the man. I may be a complacent husband but I am not a damned fool, and my disposition is not a forgiving one."

Helen gazed at her engagement book. He had not even noticed that for two weeks she had not been to a single dance—not even been out; and yet he had dared to claim the right to control her actions. To give in to him now would be an acknowledgment of servitude, and he would congratulate himself on her submission. She sat down at the desk and wrote a short note to Paul Marks.

The Reverend George Elder had most effectively neutralized the efforts of his daughter.

CHAPTER IX

CLOSING IN

It was carnival night at the Duchess Rooms, and late supper-parties were adding to the crowd that already thronged the smooth, polished floor. The light from the revolving reflector in the ceiling spangled the dancers with silver stars,

as the strains of the waltz died away. A spontaneous burst of applause signified approval, and once again the monotonous beat of the drum set the room in motion—one . . . two . . . three—one . . . two . . . three . . .

"You are dancing better than ever, to-night, Helen. The rest has done you good."

"I think it has," she whispered. Never before had she felt so satisfied with her partner—he had been charming . . . careful not to tire her, responsive to her mood, gentle and courteous. Helen wondered why she had ever been afraid of him, for he was only a boy after all—and to-night the glamour of youth seemed to radiate from him. There was something in her which thrilled to the gentle pressure of his body as he guided her skilfully through the maze of dancers. It could not be love; she was not such a fool as that! But it was something which harmonized with her rebellious mood . . . something which softened the sting of her husband's neglect.

And Paul Marks realized that in some mysterious way fate had played into his hand. But, was it fate? In the half-light two piercing eyes seemed to regard him distrustfully, and he heard again that faint hissing sound, so elusive and yet so suggestive—"Nobody has ever played me false and lived to tell the tale." He shivered slightly . . . he was no match for that man . . . and there could be no turning back.

"What is it, Paul?" she asked. "Surely you can't be cold in this crush?"

He pulled himself together and laughed. "Enjoyment, if anything. I have never enjoyed a dance as much, but the floor is beginning to get too crowded."

"Yes," she agreed. "It seems a pity to spoil it; and the day—or rather the night—is still young."

"Come and hear my Bechstein for half an hour and then I will see you home. You have never seen my flat."

For a moment she hesitated, but the memory of her interview with Aubrey still rankled in her mind. And Paul had been very nice.

"All right," she said.

She collected her wraps and joined him at the entrance.

"I didn't bring the car," he said. "We'll take a taxi."

At the entrance to the block of flats he nodded familiarly to the night porter, and they entered the lift.

"It's on the fifth floor," he said, as he pressed the button. "One gets more fresh air and sunlight up there, also it is much quieter."

"What a jolly room!" she exclaimed, when he had switched on the light. "You have luxurious tastes, Paul."

"Yes. We have a good deal in common." And his eyes flashed their appreciation of her beauty as he took the cloak from her.

She glanced around the room and her eyes rested on the slave picture, illuminated by reflected light from a shaded lamp placed above it.

"What a beastly picture, Paul! The helplessness . . . the despair . . . of that girl. It's terrible!"

"Yet, it is true to life—the greed of the Jew, the animal desire of the savage . . . the suggestion of relentless purpose . . . I like it, for it helps me to remember."

"What Paul?"

"How far we have advanced beyond that primitive state! Love is no longer a blind passion—it is a thing of beauty . . . a willing surrender to a high emotion . . . a fleeting glimpse of fairyland in a commonplace world."

He placed his hands on her bare shoulders and gazed into the depths of her blue eyes. "My God, Helen, you are lovely! Do you think that a dress like this is quite fair? It either reveals too little or too much."

"Don't be absurd, Paul, it is merely fashionable. You have seen a hundred similar frocks this evening."

"Yes," he said slowly. "But the provocation is proportional to the physical charms of the wearer. You were far the most beautiful woman in the room."

She released his hands. "What about the wonderful piano, Paul?"

He sat down and played the "Valse Triste" of Sibelius.

"It has a beautiful tone," she said, "and you play well. This room induces a spirit of peace and contentment." She stretched herself luxuriously in the arm-chair.

"Try the couch, Helen; it's far more comfy than that chair." And he arranged the cushions for her.

"Ah!" she whispered. "There's something exotic about this room, Paul. No . . . not the ornaments . . . they are probably made in Birmingham . . . it's something in the general atmosphere of the place . . . The temple bells are ringing. . . ."

She gazed into his eyes, and slowly he moved towards her.

"Helen . . . I love you."

Like a sleepy child she stretched out her arms towards him; and gently, with a caressing, stroking movement, he passed his hands over them. Her eyelids closed. "Paul," she said, dreamily.

He continued the soft, rhythmic movement and slowly, imperceptibly, disarranged her flimsy dress. Then he placed his right arm around her and kissed her on the breast, whilst his left hand moved slowly to the edge of the couch.

There was a bright flash, and she opened her eyes.

"What was that, Paul?"

He got up and went behind the Japanese screen.

"That wretched fuse again!" he exclaimed.

The next morning Helen Heylet regretted her escapade. It had been carried out in a spirit of bravado and defiance . . . and she felt vaguely uneasy. Something had happened. She did not know exactly what it was, but it reminded her of that evening at the Gaskells . . . and then there was her dress . . . Of course, it was entirely Aubrey's fault, but she wished that she had not indulged her resentment. It was only a confession of weakness, and now she saw its futility; for, in spite of all her protestations of independence, she was not prepared to face disgrace . . . not for Paul Marks.

CHAPTER X

THE LETTER

SEVERAL weeks had gone by and the gossips of St. Jude's had been busy.

"I have done my best," said the vicar.

Henry Judson was obviously distressed.

"There can be no doubt," he remarked, "that Heylet is largely to blame. I have seen a good deal of him lately; indeed, we have become almost friendly—as friendly as it is possible to become with a man so wrapped up in himself. To a woman of her temperament he must be, to say the least of it, very difficult."

"Yes. But there must be something else. Barbara is very worried about it, and it takes a good deal to worry her."

"They are great friends, I believe."

"It is not a friendship I have ever encouraged."

"Don't you think, Vicar, that you are a little hard on Helen Heylet? In my association with the husband I have recently seen a good deal of her, and I cannot help feeling that she is more sinned against than sinning. It occurred to me that possibly you might help her . . . a friendly chat . . . a word in season. That is why I came to see you."

The Vicar was moved. "What a good fellow you are, Henry!"

"There's not much an old derelict can do. It brings a certain degree of satisfaction and helps one to forget. In my own way, Vicar, I am a proud man, and it tickles my pride to know that people—young people—trust me and that I can help them."

"There's parsons *and* parsons," said Mr. Potter sententiously, "and I don't like Elder."

"What's the matter with him?" Bessie asked.

"Too smug and self-satisfied for my liking, and he's a toady—likes 'em with money or with a handle to their names."

"Oh, well! What do you expect? He's a fashionable parson, and wants to become a bishop. It's part of his job."

"I like them affable, Bessie. Canon Clay may not have been much of a preacher, but he was always affable—passed the time of day and shook hands . . . in my position such things are expected. Mr. Henry Judson now—his new churchwarden—is always affable, so it isn't the church, it's the man." And Mr. Potter felt that he had certainly got the better of his pert companion.

"Yes," she agreed, "Mr. Judson is very affable. Gave me a pound at Xmas, and I'm not the butler. Our Aubrey is choosing his friends with discretion."

"You've a mercenary mind, my dear. But he's unselfish too . . . The interest he takes in other people . . . Never thinks of himself, like the Vicar. That blotter he gave the mistress at Christmas . . . No end of trouble he took so that it should match the other things on her writing-table. 'Potter,' he says, 'if it's not a success I shall blame you.' And it was a success."

Bessie sighed. "What's wrong with the mistress?"

Mr. Potter caressed his chin reflectively. "The very question I was going to ask you. She never goes out in the evening now! . . . says it's doctor's orders. Then there's that hunted look, as though somebody was after her and she couldn't escape. Have you noticed it, Bessie?"

The girl nodded her head sagely. "They often gets it nowadays—the doctors call it 'neurastheny'. They put them into nursing homes and feed them up same as those Strasburg geese."

"You're lying, Bessie. And you know it."

"Perhaps," she replied. "But I'm fond of the mistress . . . he's not fit to lick her boots . . . and I'm afraid. She can't sleep, and she gets letters which she burns."

"And she generally throws her letters into the waste-paper basket?"

"Yes."

Mr. Potter had not overstated the case when he said that Helen Heylet had a hunted look. What, however, he had failed to convey was the fact that the hunted animal was at bay. But that was obvious as she tore open the plain white envelope and read the message conveyed therein.

MADAM,

With reference to your esteemed communication: the negative and photographs will be delivered to your husband to-morrow morning without fail. Should you wish to cancel the order on the terms suggested, I shall be at the studio at 6.30 this evening.

Yours faithfully.

SAMUEL LANGFORD.

For some time she pondered over the letter, then she tore it up and threw the pieces into the fire. It was only two o'clock. Four hours and a half to wait! She went to her bedroom and unlocked the safe where she kept her jewels.

CHAPTER XI

MURDER

AT eight o'clock in the evening Julia Bloggs, having finished her other work, went to the flat of Mr. Paul Marks and let herself in with her latch-key. When he went out for the evening, she always made it her last job to bank up his fire and tidy up. He always expected to find the fire alight when he returned from his evening's amusement. She was not complaining, for the room was cosy and she had a key which fitted his tantalus.

She switched on the tall standard lamp with the pink shade, which threw a subdued and uncritical light on the

field of her labours; for Julia Bloggs was conscientious and hated the sight of dust. The room fulfilled the modest requirements of the available illumination. She unlocked the tantalus and helped herself to a liberal supply of whisky. She swallowed it, locked up the tantalus and polished the glass. She was a careful woman and never took too much—enough to show. With a sigh of satisfaction she subsided into a comfortable arm-chair in front of the fire—she always basked for a few minutes before completing her labours.

The chair was a low one and placed her in a convenient position for a final survey of the floor.

Ah! She had almost overlooked that white object lying in the shadow by the piano. And Paul Marks was particular . . . he did not like things to be left lying about. She levered herself out of the chair and crossed the room . . . then she shrieked, for the white object was a human hand, and it was attached to a dead body.

Mrs. Bloggs was no athlete and she suffered from the rheumatics "somethin' cruel," but her performance on this occasion was creditable. She left the flat at express speed and collided with an elderly gentleman who was waiting for the lift.

"What's the matter, my good woman?" he demanded, when he had recovered his breath and retrieved his eyeglass.

"Murder!" she gasped.

"Nonsense," he said. "You've been drinking."

It is an eloquent testimony to the nervous tension of Julia Bloggs that she did not assert that she was a life-long abstainer. She merely gasped and pointed to the open door of Paul Marks' flat.

"Nonsense!" said the man again, but with less conviction.

At this moment the lift arrived, and he suggested that the attendant was the right and proper person to investigate such matters.

The coroner's jury had no difficulty in finding a verdict of "wilful murder". No other verdict was possible. Very

little was known about the victim. Apparently he had no relations, or, at any rate, none who were willing to acknowledge their relationship. He had been at Cambridge, where he had earned an unenviable reputation as a gambler, and eventually he had been "sent down". During his stay at the University he had apparently done very little work, but had gained a certain notoriety as a skilful pianist and an authority on spiritualism. Indeed it was a seance, attended by one or two ladies of doubtful reputation, which had brought down upon him the displeasure of the University authorities. Of his subsequent history very little was known beyond the fact that his financial state was always precarious.

Sir Chorley Bartle had clearly stated the cause of death: Paul Marks had been stabbed in the neck from behind—between the second and third cervical vertebrae—by a sharp knife with a narrow blade. The weapon had been left in the wound, and had proved to be a small Italian stiletto. There was a second small wound in close proximity to the fatal one, but it had only just pierced the skin and no damage had been caused to any deeper structures. A complete autopsy had been performed, and the contents of the stomach analysed. No other cause of death had been discovered, and indeed no other cause seemed necessary in view of the fact that the spinal cord had been practically severed by the knife. Sir Chorley Bartle gave it as his carefully considered opinion that Paul Marks had died of cardiac and respiratory failure induced by injury to the cervical section of the spinal cord.

Mrs. Bloggs stated that she discovered the body whilst engaged in cleaning the sitting-room of the dead gentleman. Directly she saw the corpse she knew that it was murder, and . . . but the Coroner did not want to hear anything more from Julia Bloggs.

The hall-porter testified to the fact that a lady, heavily veiled, had entered the flats at 6.30. She had not used the lift, but had walked upstairs. Twenty minutes later she had hurried out of the building. He had picked her out from a number of other women at the police station . . . and—

in reply to a question from the Coroner—she was now in court. He indicated Helen Heylet.

James Potter, butler to the Heylets, stated, with dignity but reluctance, that the dagger produced in court was the property of his mistress. It always lay on her writing-desk and was used as a paper knife.

Amongst the property of the deceased the police had found certain papers and photographs, which clearly proved that at the time of his death Marks was engaged in blackmailing Helen Heylet. An appointment with her was booked in his diary for 6.30 on the day he was killed.

At the police court it was practically a repetition of the evidence given before the Coroner, only, Helen Heylet was in the dock. Certain matters were gone into in greater detail, solicitors for defence and prosecution entered into wordy arguments on minor legal points and a rambling and rather incoherent statement, made by the prisoner, was read out in court. It conveyed very little information one way or the other, except to prove conclusively that she was not in a fit condition to make any statement at all.

CHAPTER XII

BARBARA AND PETER

THEY only "dined" at the vicarage on state occasions. As a rule they indulged in that dietetic enormity, "a meat tea".

"For what we are about to receive may the Lord make us truly thankful. Amen."

The Reverend George Elder sat down and removed the cover.

"Pork again, Kate!" he said. "And rather under-done, I fear."

Kate looked at him reproachfully.

"But, George, you said how delicious it was when we had it last week."

Barbara came to the rescue.

"Of course you don't fancy pork after all those cream cakes you had for tea at Mrs. King's, Pater. Our daily ration of fats, carbohydrates, and proteids needs to be well balanced. If you were an Eskimo, now, and had to contend with an Arctic climate you might manage it."

"I happen not to be an Eskimo, Barbara, and I was speaking to your mother."

"Bullying her, you mean."

"Barbara, Barbara, dear," said the peacemaker, "you mustn't talk to your father like that; he has a great deal to worry him just now."

"If you mean Helen Heylet, that doesn't worry him. Ever since it happened he has been saying and looking 'There, I told you so!' all the time. At breakfast he told us at length the history of the little white goat of Monsieur Seguin, as a parable well suited to the present deplorable situation. He has even threatened me with a similar tragic fate if I persist in my independent ways. I'm just about sick of it!"

And Barbara did a thing which she had not done for years. She burst into tears.

The Reverend George was about to speak, but a look from Kate drove him to the refuge of roast pork.

She put her arms round the girl protectively and kissed her.

"Never mind, darling," she said. "It's been a terrible time for you, and I know how much you love Helen."

Barbara wiped her eyes and looked defiantly at her father. "Yes," she said, "I love her and I know her. She could never have done such a thing, but it looks pretty hopeless to try to prove it."

"She was doubtless distraught when she did it," the clergyman said, "but that does not excuse the deplorable conduct which led up to the tragedy."

Barbara was too tired to argue any further with her father. She had scarcely slept since the police court proceedings—wrestling with a problem which daily seemed more

hopeless. She was essentially a logical person and logic convicted Helen Heylet of the crime. The history, the method and the motive were all perfectly clear; they fitted together and left no loophole of escape—and yet she was convinced that there must be a weak spot somewhere in the chain of evidence. She wanted an ally—somebody who could share her conviction and with whom she could discuss the case. Her mother might have done, but she was not a free agent; never, under any circumstances, would she oppose her husband either in thought or action.

Inevitably, she thought of Peter, her pal since childhood, calm, reliable and faithful. If only she could win him over, they could work at the problem together, but she must win him over first—Holmes and Watson, as he had once lightly dubbed their partnership.

After supper she slipped on her hat and coat.

"I'm going to see Peter," she said. "Roderick Haynes is looking after the case for the Heylets. Peter knows him quite well, and may be able to get me some necessary information."

Her mother kissed her. "All right, dear. Don't be too late, you need a good night's rest."

Barbara looked at her affectionately: "You are a brick, Mum!"

"I should like to do more for you, darling, but your father is not always easy, and he feels strongly on this subject."

It was the nearest Kate had ever been to criticizing her husband.

Barbara was ushered into the chaos which always enveloped Peter's work. He jumped up and automatically his hand went to his waistcoat pocket—then he noticed her face and, though he fingered the ring, he did not produce it.

"Good heavens, old thing, you do look fagged!" he exclaimed. With a sweep of his long arm he cleared a chair.

"Take a pew."

She sat down and buried her face in her hands. "I feel terribly tired," she said, "and rather helpless. At times I

am conscious of the limitations of my sex; I have even craved for masculine support."

He put his arm around her waist and kissed her.

"How's that for a start?" he asked.

"It's rather nice, Peter, in the circumstances, but it isn't business. And I've come to talk business."

"Very well," he said. "Talk."

"Peter, do you think that Helen Heylet is guilty?"

He rumbled his hair superfluously.

"I don't know about guilty, old thing, but I think she killed Paul Marks. More probably justifiable homicide or temporary insanity."

"But she didn't, Peter; she couldn't. Helen Heylet is one of the gentlest creatures living. She may have advanced ideas, she may be excitable, but she couldn't deliberately kill a person."

"But the evidence, Barbara. Instinct, even when based on intimate knowledge of a person, is no defence at law. The evidence is everything and that is dead against her. Even her own rambling statement to the police about hypnotic influence seems to support the charge; though, of course, it may lessen the responsibility."

"Peter, I want you to assume with me that she is not guilty. Let's go through the evidence item by item and see if there is any possible weakness."

"Very well. For a start I suppose we must take it for granted that the evidence of the butler, the hall-porter, and even of Mrs. Bloggs, is substantially accurate."

"Yes, the hall-porter is the only one who might possibly have made a mistake, and Helen has stated that she went to Paul Marks' rooms at 6.30, which confirms his evidence."

"Then, even with your poor opinion of Sir Chorley Bartle, you must acknowledge that the cause of death is fairly obvious. A wound of that sort may be regarded as conclusive, and the police have supplied ample evidence with regard to motive."

"Yes," she agreed, "but someone might have done it after she left the flat."

"With her stiletto, and no apparent motive!"

"This is all wrong, Peter. Let's start again and assume that she did it. She took the stiletto from her house with the deliberate intention of committing murder. She entered the block of flats and allowed the hall-porter to see her. She stabbed Marks to death and left the dagger behind so everybody would know who had done it. My dear Peter, it's preposterous! And she stabbed a second time, after making a bad shot. That's even more absurd."

"I don't see it," he objected. "She was obviously distracted with fear after she had done it, and her one idea was to get away. Criminals are always doing that sort of thing, or they would not be caught so often."

"But, Peter, the tiny wound, the prick! Don't you see the importance of that?"

He shook his head. The next moment he leapt from the arm of her chair, with a cry of pain.

"Good Lord!" he said.

"Exactly; and I only used a scarf-pin very gently. Do you think that the point of a small stiletto, used in the same way, would be very soothing? Paul Marks would have been at her throat after that first prick, and you must remember that Helen Heylet is quite a little thing. Peter! It must have been a powerful man who committed that murder."

"Not bad," said Peter grudgingly. "I thought Sir Chorley attached no importance to the small wound."

"He was concerned with the cause of death. Obviously this had nothing to do with that, it is of no importance whatever, so far as killing goes. This morning I tried stabbing my skeleton at that spot. It's very difficult to get a knife in unless you force the head forward. This afternoon I did the same experiment in the dissecting room on a man's body. I'm much stronger than Helen, but it was not at all easy. So you see we have a wound which requires some physical strength, and a preliminary misfire to warn the victim. We have the dagger left behind and an incriminating entry in the engagement diary. Supposing somebody wanted to murder Paul Marks and to fix the blame

on Helen Heylet, he could scarcely have done it more thoroughly."

"He was a genius," said Peter, "for he made the entry in Paul Marks's handwriting. That was proved. You think then that the murder was committed by a man possessing considerable muscular power."

"Half a minute. This afternoon I made a false start with that body. The knife hit the bone. So I drew it out and began again. Peter, that mark must have been exactly like the small one described at the inquest. Was Paul Marks already dead when the wound was made?"

"But they excluded all other causes of death."

"Yes," she said. "Then we must fall back on the strong man—the trouble is there was no sign of a struggle, and you jumped like anything, Peter dear, when I jabbed that pin into you!"

"Never mind, you've turned me into an honest doubter. It certainly doesn't look quite so obvious, now."

She flung her arms impulsively round his neck and kissed him; then she rumbled his curly hair, and danced around the room.

"I'm quite better now, Peter, and I'll marry you the day Helen is acquitted, or as soon afterwards as decency, a trousseau, and your banking account will permit."

"Now you are running to the other extreme," he protested, "and I don't like my future happiness to be made contingent on the discovery of hypothetical strong men who go about murdering Dagoes for no apparent reason. However, I'm at your service. What do you want me to do?"

"Get into touch with Roderick Haynes. We can only act through her legal advisers."

"I can do that all right. As a matter of fact we often play golf together, he's a nice old chap, and he loves to beat me. I think he is going to beat me to-morrow; he's eighteen and I'm six, I give him a half and he always puts it down in his diary, in red ink, when he beats me. He generally talks of offering me a partnership, on these occasions, so that I can teach him 'chip shots' at the office."

"Do teach him chip shots, Peter; it would make everything so much easier. Including the banking account, later on. He's a most successful solicitor."

That night Peter Panton had a horrible dream. He had murdered Roderick Haynes in the pot bunker guarding the sixth green. He was trying, in vain, to insert the blade of his favourite putter into the gap between the second and third cervical vertebrae. And every time he made the attempt his victim gasped, "I shall have to give up golf, it's too exasperating!"

CHAPTER XIII

THE IMPORTANCE OF GOLF

THE first tee of the Bearswell golf links was always crowded on Saturday afternoon. The starter swung round the numbers. "Thirty-three," he announced, without enthusiasm—the Saturday crowd always bored him.

"Your honour," said Roderick Haynes.

Peter teed his ball and drove it straight and far down the centre of the fairway.

The two men were of very different types; indeed they looked their handicaps. Haynes was round and short, bald in the head, chubby and clean-shaven, with a bloom about the chin suggestive of a keen razor-blade. His chest had moved down as his golf handicap had moved up, and a first-class tailor had been unable to conceal the fact. He always maintained that one of the tragedies of life was the tendency for the girth and the golf handicap and the bank balance to move upwards together.

Peter was tall and athletic, the passing of years had relieved him neither of his freckles nor of his snub nose. At school they had called him "pug Peter" to annoy him; then he took up boxing. But his friends always called him "Pug", and Peter liked it, for he knew that a boy without a nickname is an Ishmaelite. People generally liked him at sight and they always trusted him. To-day, however, Peter

was preoccupied and the fact that Haynes fluffed his first drive did not improve matters.

"Head up!" said Roderick Haynes as he plunged into the wilderness.

This would never do. At all costs he must steady the old boy. He had seen Haynes begin like that before, and, on such occasions, no power in Heaven or Earth could make him win a match with any appearance of honesty—besides there were the caddies. Peter was down in a perfect four and his opponent picked up.

"I heard a rather good tip, the other day, to prevent the head coming up," said Peter. "Try to think you are hitting a nail with a long hammer; the ball is the head of the nail and your club head the business end of the hammer. You don't take your eye off a nail. If you did, you'd biff yourself on the thumb."

Haynes was a real trier and he had a great respect—born of bitter experience—for Peter as a golfer. At intervals during the rest of the game he kept repeating in an undertone: "Nail on head, nail on head." And he played better than usual. But Peter was not out of the wood yet, for he had to lose without Haynes or the caddies suspecting; and, as luck would have it, he was in especially good form and driving a very long ball. He opened his stance slightly and commenced to slice.

"Bad luck!" said Haynes, as a glorious drive from Peter just trickled into a bunker to the right of the fairway.

"Nail on head, nail on head . . ."

"Ah! I don't want that one back."

Peter took two to get out of the bunker and Haynes won the hole. The next was the short one over the pond. Peter socketed with his mashie and sacrificed a perfectly good Dunlop to the cause. That, at any rate, looked genuine.

It had done the trick. Haynes lost his inferiority complex . . . his tail was up . . . he would be all right now . . . "Nail on head . . . nail on head." The sun was shining, it was a lovely afternoon!

At the sixth Peter was in the pot bunker guarding the

green, and suddenly he remembered his dream—he heard again the tortured Haynes protesting that he would have to give up golf. He just managed to stifle a laugh by turning it into a cough—people in bunkers are not expected to laugh . . . they are the traditional schools of weird and complicated oaths.

At the turn Haynes was well ahead and going strong—there was a suspicion of patronage in the remarks upon his opponent's play. That strange conceit peculiar to men with an eighteen handicap, who unexpectedly find their game, was upon him. He began to criticize in his mind the handicapping committee. Eighteen, indeed! And Peter was getting annoyed, for golf is golf and the trim greens, broad fairways and frowning bunkers grip you to the marrow bones. Hang it all, he intended the man to win on the last green and here he was wiping the gound with him.

Haynes won the match by five up and three to play; and, to make matters worse, he won the bye as well.

"Not bad for an old man," he said, with undisguised satisfaction, as he pocketed his opponent's half-crown. "But I think I owe it to your excellent advice—'nail on head', ha, ha! What'll you have?"

"A gin and tonic, thanks."

They took a table in a corner of the lounge and Roderick Haynes beamed on his erstwhile opponent. "Six holes in bogey, Peter. Not bad for an eighteen man, what! By the by, you remember that conversation we had a week or two ago. We shall be looking about for a third partner next year. Things are getting very busy. Of course, I can't say anything definite without consulting Raikes, but it occurred to me that possibly it was the sort of job you might like."

"Thanks very much," said Peter gratefully. "Possibly . . . er . . . I could help you for a bit with some of the . . . er . . . routine work . . . then you could see how I get on."

The shrewd eyes of the other man twinkled.

"Out with it, Peter," he said. "You've something you want to ask me, and you don't like to."

Peter passed his hand nervously through his unruly mop.

"I wondered if I could take a hand in the Marks murder case, sir. Barbara Elder is certain that Helen Heylet didn't do it, and says she believes she can get evidence to prove it."

Roderick Haynes sipped his whisky and soda. "The younger generation!" he said with a laugh. "So Miss Barbara thinks she can find out more than the police."

"It isn't exactly that, sir. It's the medical side. She says Sir Chorley Bartle . . ."

The lawyer held up his hand. "Quite so," he remarked. "If she has anything definite to bring forward you can come along and see me on Monday morning. We can't afford to miss any points, for it's a very difficult case."

"Yes . . . she says . . ."

But the older man stopped him. "Monday. I like Dr. Barbara. But whatever induced her to be a doctor? She's far too good-looking for the job. You can't imagine Helen of Troy with a stethoscope round her neck. Bah! If they are going to be doctors they ought to be forced to wear tinted, horn-rimmed spectacles, collar and tie, skirts to their ankles and their hair scraped back and tied in a bun. Then they wouldn't give the men palpitations and the women nervous dyspepsia."

Peter laughed. Barbara's figure was excellent and Haynes appreciated a good figure—one learns all sorts of things between the tee and the green. It would all help the good cause.

In his office Roderick Haynes was a very different person. Occasionally golf got the better of him—he had once been caught by his secretary practising putting into a brass ash-tray with his umbrella. She was a discreet lady, and no reference had ever been made to the episode—unless the fact that her next rise was antedated by six months had any bearing on the subject. She was an excellent secretary, good at her work and smart in appearance. Her hair was Eton-

cropped, her blouses and skirts the soul of discretion without hiding the fact that she had extremely pretty legs and a white skin. The pince-nez were probably a concession to her official position, for she was a very important little person—the tip-tilted nose of Miss Joanna Shields had struck terror into the soul of many an impatient client gazing ferociously at the small clock in the waiting-room.

Monday morning was never a good time with Roderick Haynes—there would be no more golf until Saturday, and a good deal of mental readjustment was necessary. He also knew that the bright eyes of Joanna Shields were upon him—she watched the waste-paper basket and ash-trays with anxious solicitude.

“Er . . . obliged to foreclose. Yes. That’s right. No more letters? Good.”

Miss Shields closed her note-book and pushed the chair back against the wall.

“I see,” she remarked, “that you have arranged to see Mr. Panton at eleven. You have an appointment with Mr. Albert Egan at 11.45.”

“It’ll do Egan good to wait,” he snapped. “He wouldn’t have got into this muddle if he had taken my advice. Bring me all the papers connected with the Heylet trial.”

For half an hour he concentrated on the case. He studied the evidence of the inquest and of the police-court. Then he took up and read carefully a typed report. It was headed “Statement of Helen Heylet.”

“Damn these women!” he said. “Why couldn’t she either have told the truth or held her tongue at the police station?”

The office telephone rang. “Yes?” he said.

“Oh. I’ll see them at once.”

He greeted Barbara with an elaborate courtesy which paid tribute to her beauty but, obviously, neglected her claims to recognition as a member of one of the learned professions. Then he nodded to Peter.

“Well,” he began, addressing the girl. “Peter thinks you may be able to help us in the Heylet case.”

"Yes," she replied eagerly. And she summarized the various points in favour of the accused.

"There may be something in it," he said, "but not enough for a hard-headed jury. You must remember that evidence shows clearly that Mrs. Heylet was in a highly neurotic state when she was arrested. In such a condition a woman is capable of actions which would be quite impossible for her under different circumstances; and, of course, it robs the fact that the knife was left in the wound of all significance. As a matter of fact, the more her mental condition is stressed the better for the defence, if—as I think we must—we are to rely on the emotional factor and justification. The jury will have no sympathy for such a man as Paul Marks, and every juryman has a sneaking affection for the unwritten law."

For a moment he hesitated. "But the worst of it is that Ralph Bloxham is trying the case—he's not the man to allow a jury to be unduly swayed by sentiment. He's as cold as a glacier and as unemotional as the eternal mountains. Well, well! We can but try."

He held her hand for a moment as he said "good-bye".

"Let me know if anything definite turns up. You may be right."

"He's told us absolutely nothing," Barbara grumbled, as they walked out of the building.

"Of course he hasn't. It's not a lawyer's job to talk, he leaves that to the barristers. For all that, I am sure he will jump at it if you can get any definite evidence. He's not a bit satisfied with their line of defence with Bloxham as judge. The question is, what are we to do next?"

"That is perfectly obvious, my dear Watson. I am going to see Mr. Albert Ohns."

CHAPTER XIV

THE IMPORTANCE OF MR. OHNS

ALBERT OHNS was the post-mortem attendant at St. Swithin's Hospital where the autopsy had been performed. Barbara had been a student there, which may account for her opinion of Sir Chorley Bartle, for he was not popular at the hospital. She knew old Albert Ohns very well indeed, he was quite an integral part of the institution—nobody could remember the post-mortem room without Mr. Albert Ohns. His white, bristly hair had a Teutonic crop which showed the pink scalp below. His ruddy face perspired profusely and had a perpetual shine. He had four or five accessory chins and his neck hung over his dirty collar in multiple rolls. He punctured himself with septic knives and germ-laden needles with apparent impunity. Years of soaking in septic material had left him immune to the ordinary risks of the post-mortem room. He scorned gloves. Two very bright eyes twinkled in the depths of his massive face. For many years those eyes had seen strange sights and they never forgot what they saw. A grim occupation! Mr. Ohns was a philosopher, but he had no toleration for poetry.

Nobody at the Hospital knew anything about Mr. Ohns's home life. Nobody at home knew anything about his work, except that he held an official post at a hospital. He lived his life in two water-tight compartments, and it was probably this dual existence which had enabled him to preserve his sanity. Those who watched him daily at his grim occupation would have been amazed to hear that he had a charming and devoted wife, a family of grown-up sons and daughters—all doing well—and that on Sundays he taught in the Sunday-school, and was a firm believer in the resurrection of the body.

Barbara realized that the task before her was not an easy one. The old man was always reluctant to talk about his

cases, and any suspicion that unauthorized information was being sought would shut him up like an oyster. As a rule he got on well with those in authority, but he loathed Sir Chorley Bartle, who had referred to him, on one celebrated occasion, as a "sceptic and obese obscenity".

Mr. Ohns generally finished his work at six o'clock, and Barbara decided that this would be the best time to interview him. She must proceed cautiously, she must not appear too anxious—it was not sufficient to hook Mr. Albert Ohns, she must play him as well. She opened the door and peeped inside . . . He was alone.

"Good evening, Albert," she said casually. "Have you seen Dr. Crisp?"

"Lef' 'arf 'our ago."

"What a nuisance! I've been chasing him all over the hospital. He generally comes back to the department after tea, doesn't he?"

"Sometimes . . . may be. Sometimes . . . not."

She smiled at him and he scratched his head reflectively with a murderous-looking knife which he was cleaning.

"May I sit down for a few minutes?" she asked. "I've been rushing about all day."

"I s'pose so," he said. "Wimmen ain't as strong as men. What they wants to be doctors for fair beats me. 'Ere they stands, in front of the class, getting in everybody's way. Then they goes an' gets married. It ain't decent neither. Men corpses weren't meant to be seen, all cut up, by wimmen. Cuts 'em up 'emselves, too!"

It was an old grievance and she let him talk himself into a good humour.

"Anyhow, it hasn't done the work of the department any harm," she remarked. "We get our fair share of all the important cases."

Albert snorted. "More fools they!"

"They could scarcely find a better man to do the work than Sir Chorley," she suggested.

The little pigs' eyes gazed at her suspiciously, but she seemed sincere.

"They wants the troof . . . yes . . . the 'ole troof . . . yes . . . an' nothink but the troof. They don't get the 'ole troof . . . 'e's in too great of an 'urry."

"You mean he doesn't waste time. He's a very important and busy man. But he gets all the facts that are necessary."

"Everyfink's necessary when it's murder."

She got up as though to go. "You are simply guessing," she said, "because you don't like him . . . Can you give me an instance?"

But Mr. Ohns had said enough. "It ain't nothink to do with me," he growled.

"It's nothing to do with me either. But I'll give you five shillings if you can tell me of a single important thing which he missed in . . . say that stabbing case you had a week ago."

"Important!" he grumbled, "'ow could anything be important in a case like that, wi' the knife bang through the cord?"

It was obvious the old man was racking his brains for something that would justify his contention.

"'E 'ad a small round bruise on the palm of 'is right 'and. That's some 'at which ought 'er gone in the notes. Ought'en it?"

• "Perhaps it did."

"It never did. 'Cause 'e never saw it. The 'and was clinched, an' 'e never opened it. I 'ad to when I washed it, an' then I saw the bruise."

"That's scarcely worth five bob," said Barbara, as she handed him the money.

"No. A simple case 'e were. A blackmailer, they says, like that other chap, wot drowned 'imself."

"That other chap," Barbara repeated. "I had almost forgotten him. You had him as well, Albert?"

"Yus, an' wonnerful excited Inspector Rose were about 'im . . . 'Sooicide agin,' 'e says, 'good Lord.'"

Barbara was not quite sure whether the five shillings had been well spent or not. The bruise seemed unimportant, except for the fact that Sir Chorley had failed to notice it,

and it might be used to confound him in cross-examination. There might, however, be some significance in the remark of Inspector Rose, for evidently blackmailers were not dying in the way that nature intended. She might, of course, approach the Inspector, but it was always difficult to get the police to talk. Obviously, however, this was not the only recent suicide amongst blackmailers. Possibly the post-mortem notes of the drowning case might help. There would be no difficulty in obtaining them, for it was ancient history now and they would be filed.

CHAPTER XV

A GLIMMER OF LIGHT

FOR half an hour there had been silence in the room.

"I always said he was a fool," Barbara exclaimed, as she threw the papers down on the table. "But Sir Chorley Bartle being a fool doesn't help poor Helen very much."

Peter gazed at her reproachfully.

"I'm not gifted with second sight," he protested, "and my mind refuses to make bricks without straw. Will you be good enough to supply the pabulum which will enable Watson to prove himself a perfect fool?"

"There's no straw. At least not enough to make any bricks; and nothing whatever is required, Peter dear, to prove that you are a perfect fool. It is conviction—I am convinced that somewhere in these notes we have a clue to the mystery. This, my dear Watson, is an exact copy of the autopsy notes on a man who was found drowned in the Thames, near London Bridge, several months ago."

"The connection with our present case is not apparent."

"Perhaps it may help if I state that this man was a successful blackmailer, and that during the last twelve months there has been a peculiar and fatal epidemic amongst successful blackmailers. Paul Marks was a blackmailer; but apparently he could not be said, at the time of his death, to have reached

the high-water mark of success. The evidence of a successful coup is lacking. However, for the sake of argument we will assume that there is some link between the various cases. I am interested in the bionomics of the species to which they all belong. We have agreed that, as Helen is innocent, the death of Paul Marks is a mysterious one—he therefore comes into the same category as the others.”

“What are you getting at? It all seems a jumble to me.”

“For the moment I am trying to prove one thing, and one thing only—that this man was not drowned. I thought he wasn’t when I read the original report, which gave dear Pater so much religious satisfaction; I’m practically certain of it now.

“These notes have been compiled from two sources—firstly, those made by Dr. Crisp, who did most of the work; secondly, those added by Sir Chorley as the result of his own personal observations. In Dr. Crisp’s notes I find no positive evidence of drowning—obviously he did not regard the state of the lungs or the condition of the air passages as in any way characteristic, there was no water in the stomach, no sub-pleural hæmorrhages, the blood in the heart and large vessels had clotted—indeed there was a slight tendency to the formation of ante-mortem clots. Now, Peter, this is doubtless all very nauseating to a layman, but what it means is this: that though there is no conclusive evidence against drowning the balance of probability is most definitely against it.

“Now we come to Sir Chorley. He notes that there was a blood-stained frothy fluid in the upper air passages and considerable congestion of the vessels of the brain. At the inquest he stated definitely that death was due to drowning.”

“Any other points?” said Peter, who felt called upon to make some intelligent observation.

The girl ran through the notes again. “Mole . . . scar . . . bruise . . . lividity . . .

“Peter! Peter! Paul Marks had a small circular bruise too.”

"My dear old thing, don't be hysterical. How could a small bruise account for death? Besides, if you examined a hundred healthy people, you would probably find bruises on fifty of them."

"I know. But it's a straw, Peter; I'm clutching at straws. If that man was not drowned there is only one thing which could possibly have accounted for his death, and that is poison. They did not test for poison, Sir Chorley was so certain he had been drowned."

"But poison was definitely excluded in the case of Paul Marks. So where is your link?" asked Peter helpfully.

"Oh, *do* shut up. I know quite as well as you do that the evidence is dead against us, but, for all that, I am going to see old Andrew Gerstein."

"And who may he be when he is at home?"

Barbara took down a monumental tome from the book-case. "That's Andrew Gerstein," she said.

Peter glanced at the title: "The Alkaloid Poisons," by Andrew Gerstein.

"Yes," she said, "the most famous toxicologist of the day, and I'm one of the few people he tolerates. He's blind as a bat—frightfully short-sighted—and I found his glasses for him one day when some wag in the class had hidden them. He always takes them off when he wants to do any very fine work, and one day they disappeared. He knocked over a retort and two beakers, also scorched his hand over a bunsen burner before I found them for him. He was very grateful. The students regard him as a freak and make fun of him. I am sure he will help if he can, for Sir Chorley once referred to him as 'a diminutive crank, with the proclivities of a witch doctor'. He didn't mind the last part but the word 'diminutive' he has never forgiven."

"What can he do?"

"I don't know, but if it's poison he'll smell it out. I'm going to take him these notes . . . there may be something."

"Ah!" said Peter. "We advance." He took the ring from his pocket and slipped it over the third finger of her left hand.

"Perhaps . . . some day," she laughed. And the ring rolled across the polished table towards him.

"There are moments, Babs, when I solemnly resolve never to ask you again."

"My dear boy, the habits of a lifetime can't be broken in a moment. If I live to be an old maid of seventy you will still be pursuing me with that absurd ring." And she kissed him lightly on the forehead.

"Snacks," he said. "That's what you give me, when I want a meal."

"Are you aware, Peter, that it is now eleven o'clock, that this is my maiden chamber, and that my reverend parent would not regard it as proper? Have you no consideration for my reputation?"

"I feel like a cave man," he growled, and seized her in his powerful arms and kissed her with passion and relish. For a moment she wrestled with him. Then he let her go, and she smoothed her hair.

"Oh, Peter! What would the Pater say? The other day he said to darling little Mum: 'Ahem! What I like about Peter is that he's so reliable and safe.' By Jove, my dear, you felt 'reliable' all right, just now, but I'm blessed if you felt 'safe'."

Peter blushed.

"You know, Peter, your vasomotor system is not at all well under control. I should be blushing, not you, after that cave man exhibition. Shall I give you a nerve tonic?"

"Oh, damn medicine!" said Peter Pantan.

CHAPTER XVI

ANDREW GERSTEIN

The girl on the couch clenched her small fist.

"I hate them," said Anitra. "How dare they make fun of you!"

Andrew Gerstein stroked his beard reflectively.

"But, dear," he protested, "I think I must be rather funny really. Last week I walked from the Cecil to Charing Cross holding up my walking-stick because it was raining, and yesterday I thought I saw a vacant seat in the tube, and sat down on a young lady's lap. She was a very nice young lady, but she asked me to move."

The girl clapped her hands. "Oh, daddy, you are a joke."

"That's what the students think, my dear, only they don't say it so nicely. It is sometimes very awkward being so short-sighted . . . and sometimes very useful."

"But they ruined your new hat to-day!"

"A mere trifle. They placed it where the large beaker generally stands. I wasn't wearing my glasses, I didn't appreciate the substitution . . . the bunsen flame is a very hot one, it doesn't agree with a felt hat." And he rubbed his hands and chuckled.

The girl on the couch stretched out her hands and drew him towards her:

"I sometimes think, darling, that you are almost too good to be true—at any rate you are far too good for a lot of callous medical students."

The man sighed. "You are getting very like your poor mother, Nitra; she always tried to make the best of me . . . other people called me an absent-minded old crank."

The cripple girl laughed scornfully. "Absent-minded," she said. "Absent-minded! And for sixteen years you've been father, mother and nurse to me! Do you remember, when it first happened, how you used to rub my funny little cold legs . . . and the masseuse used to laugh and say: 'a man can't do it'; but you did it better than she did, and you never hurt me."

"The police ought to stop those ice-cream men ringing their bells, it's becoming a perfect nuisance," said Andrew Gerstein irritably.

"But, daddy dear, it's the telephone."

"Plague take the telephone," he grunted, as he went out of the room. "It's the bane of my existence."

"Well, dear," said Anitra, when he returned, "what did he want, and when is he coming to get it out of you?"

"What are you talking about?"

"But that's what the telephone always means, that's what it is there for—so that somebody who makes fun of you, may ring up and ask for help."

"As it happens you are quite wrong. To begin with it's a she, not a he; secondly, it's a lady doctor, not a student; thirdly, she is a very nice person . . . she found my glasses one day when I had . . . er . . . mislaid them."

"It wouldn't have made the slightest difference if it had been the boy who had the cheek to hide them; you would have helped him just the same."

"It is Dr. Barbara Elder, which conveys nothing to you, and she wants help in a murder case, and she won't get it. I absolutely refuse to go into any more witness-boxes to be made a fool of by an overgrown schoolboy in a wig and black gown. Let them send for Sir Chorley—it requires an excess of self-confidence and an implicit faith in one's own infallibility to make a good expert witness. The man who can see both sides of a question is the butt of any legal cheap-jack in Court."

He looked at his watch. "Perhaps it would be as well to delay tea until she gets here."

The girl touched a bell by her side.

"We are expecting a visitor, Betty. Will you make the tea when she comes."

Plainly Andrew Gerstein was disturbed in mind. At intervals he muttered: "I won't touch the case! I won't touch the case!"

"That's what you always say, dear," Anitra observed.

"But I mean it, this time. Do you remember that last case? The counsel for the defence said: 'Now please be *very* careful, Mr. Gerstein,' and in summing up the judge called the attention of the jury to the fact that apparently I did not know my own mind. He was good enough to add that he did not think it was deliberate dishonesty. And I

had stated quite plainly that I had not yet completed my investigations on that special group of poisons."

And the learned Professor glared fiercely at his companion, as though his imagination had clothed her in the hated black gown and curled wig.

"I want my tea dreadfully," said Anitra. "Will she be long now?"

"The alternatives are omnibus, taxicab, tube and walk. I told her I could not do anything, and she said she was coming to see me, in what I should distinctly describe as a taxi voice."

A loud ring at the bell indicated the accuracy of his reasoning. Dr. Elder was evidently in no mood to be trifled with, and Andrew Gerstein looked helplessly about him for some means of escape.

Barbara was shown in.

She glanced in surprise at the fragile, fair-haired girl on the couch. Nobody at the Hospital knew anything very definite about the Professor's domestic affairs, but somehow she had not expected this. He drew up a chair for her . . . and sat down upon it.

"I can't have anything to do with a police case," he said, "it disturbs my work."

"You have taken her chair," said Anitra.

He arose in confusion and made suitable apologies.

"Leave it until after tea," the invalid suggested. "Things seem ever so much easier after a cup of tea."

But even tea could not woo the professor from his pre-occupation. As Anitra pointed out, his manners were deplorable; he not only forgot to pass things but was twice caught in the act of drinking his visitor's tea. It was with a feeling of relief that they watched Betty clear the table. Barbara looked doubtfully at Anitra. It seemed a grim subject to discuss in her presence but she evidently gave Andrew Gerstein confidence and expected to take part in the discussion. She laughed reassuringly:

"Don't worry about me, daddy tells me everything. I'm much more used to horrors than he is, for I sleep badly."

Barbara turned to the famous chemist.

"You have probably seen about the Marks murder case."

"No," he said, "I never read about such things. They don't interest me."

"This one interests me because the accused happens to be one of my greatest friends."

"I am sorry."

"But she didn't do it. She is incapable of such an action. That is why I have come to see you."

"But, my dear young lady, what do you want me to do about it?"

She produced her notes. "This is the report of another case, but it has some bearing on the one I am interested in. Will you read the notes through and tell me if you think the man could possibly have died by any other means than drowning? If he did, it is just possible that I may be able to prove Helen Heylet to be innocent."

With a sigh of resignation he took the papers from her hand and sat down in the arm-chair. Barbara watched his face anxiously. It was quite obvious that he was reading them more to please her than with any hope of finding anything out. He read two pages, then she saw him sit up and settle his glasses more firmly on his nose. He turned back to the preceding page, took out a pocket-book and made some notes. When he came to the end he turned back and read the whole report through again. Then he handed the notes back to Barbara.

"And why," he asked, "do you connect this case with the more recent one?"

"I don't exactly, but I hoped you would be able to. You see, they were both successful blackmailers . . . and there have been other . . . mysterious deaths . . . suicides and so forth."

"But Sir Chorley gave definite evidence that this man died by drowning."

"I know. But did he?"

"Tell me what you know about the other one."

Barbara ran over the details of the medical evidence, and the further facts supplied by Mr. Ohns.

To her surprise the little man sprang up and pranced up and down the room.

"So!" he exclaimed. "So! It is just possible that they are connected. I should like to see that body. An exhumation would be most interesting. I myself would make the examination." And he plucked wildly at his long-suffering beard.

"But the Home Office would require reasonable grounds for giving permission."

He drew a sheet of note-paper towards him and wrote rapidly. Then he placed it in an envelope and sealed it.

"Give that to the solicitor for the defence. It provides sufficient grounds for a fresh autopsy."

"But, daddy," said Anitra. "If you make the examination you will have to give evidence in Court."

"Of course I shall give evidence in Court. Whoever said I wouldn't? This is most unusual. We can't leave a woman to Sir Chorley Bartle's tender mercies under such circumstances. I don't say he is wrong, he has had a very large experience of such cases." He turned to Barbara: "You realize, of course, that if I find nothing fresh it will make it more difficult for the defence."

"It's the only chance, so we must risk it. Good-bye, Professor, and thanks ever so much."

The little man lowered his voice: "Come and see Anitra sometimes," he said, "I'm afraid she is often lonely."

"I should love to," said Barbara, and she went across to the couch and kissed the girl.

"I wish you could explain to them how good he is," whispered Anitra, "then, perhaps, they would be nice to him. And he does appreciate it so much when people are nice."

CHAPTER XVII

EXHUMATION

THE following morning Peter rang up Roderick Haynes.

"Mr. Haynes is very busy to-day. Can I give him a message?"

"Will you say it's Mr. Panton, and that he has some important information with regard to the Marks murder case."

"Hold on a minute. I'll put you through."

An hour later Peter was at the office receiving preferential treatment at the hands of a gracious Miss Shields, to the obvious annoyance of two clients who were firmly rooted in the waiting room, and for half an hour had been regarding one another with expressions suggestive of two bull terriers with one bone between them.

"As quick as you can, Peter, or I shall lose two perfectly good clients; but it sounded too urgent to wait."

Peter handed him Andrew Gerstein's letter. Haynes read it, and whistled.

"Then Miss Barbara was on the track after all!"

He took up the telephone. "Get me Inspector Rose, as quickly as possible."

"Of course it adds to our risks. Our case will be much more difficult to defend if a second examination only confirms the original report."

The telephone bell rang.

"Yes. That you, Inspector? Mr. Haynes speaking. Can you come round and see me as soon as possible? Ten-thirty. Right."

"I shall have to let the Scotland Yard people know, also the Coroner, and then, of course, there is the official consent of the Secretary of State. Come back again, Peter, about 12.30. I'll let you know what has happened, then. And . . . oh, yes . . . Bring Miss Barbara . . . she has a right to have a finger in the pie."

At half-past twelve Barbara and Peter were shown into the solicitor's office.

"I congratulate you," he said to the girl. "You have succeeded in stirring up quite a considerable part of the City of London this morning—my work is disorganized, the Coroner is annoyed, Sir Chorley Bartle is apoplectic, Scotland Yard apprehensive, and the Home Office awake. There's the very deuce to pay and for two pins they would refuse the application, but that note from Professor Gerstein is too much for them. We shan't hear anything very definite for a bit, but I feel sure it will be all right. What I really wanted to see you for was to put you wise as to some of the points in the case, which you probably don't know. Apparently we shall have to work in partnership!

"Firstly, with regard to Helen Haylet's statement to the police. Of course, at that time she did not know that they had found any compromising photographs. She stated that Paul Marks possessed hypnotic powers, and that she was under his influence; that he had asked her to go to his rooms at 6.30, and that she had felt compelled to go; that they had chatted for a short time together, and that he had played on the piano. After that she had come away.

"When asked about the knife she became very agitated and said that for some time she had been afraid of the man and had carried it about in her bag for protection. She added, however, that she did not think she had it with her that evening.

"A hopeless story, from the point of view of the defence. Now for her story to me, after the police court proceedings—at least it has an appearance of truth.

"She had been blackmailed by the man for some weeks on the strength of a certain photograph which he obtained under peculiar—very peculiar—circumstances. On the day of the murder she received a letter saying that a friend of his would show the photographs to her husband on the following day, unless she was willing to buy them with the famous pearl necklace. If she wished to do this she was to be in his rooms at 6.30 that evening. She determined to

pay the price and, at the time arranged, took the necklace to his rooms. She states that in her presence he burnt the negative and prints. If he did so, he kept others which, as you know, the police found. She then gave him the necklace and hurried out of the building.

"So much for her story. And, of course, the fact that no necklace was found in his rooms might indicate a subsequent robbery with violence. Unfortunately it is quite impossible to put her into the witness-box to tell that story."

"But why?" asked Peter.

"Because her husband informs me that the pearls are at the present moment reposing in her private safe. You can scarcely wonder that I had decided to rely upon a plea of justification."

"Half a minute," said Barbara. "Does Helen know that the pearls have been found?"

"No. Her mental state is such that we have refrained from troubling her any further. Her evidence is practically worthless after the yarn she gave to the police, and she would be a perfect nightmare in the witness-box. Now, of course, if Gerstein finds out anything it may change the whole complexion of the case. A man like Paul Marks has a great many enemies; and in her excitement, she could quite easily have dropped the stiletto in the room, or even have had it abstracted from her bag by someone hiding there."

"That's a bit thin," said Barbara, "but, for the moment, it'll have to do. Beggars can't be choosers."

He gazed at her reproachfully. "You are a very impertinent young lady! I may say that it is a possibility which the police are considering as an alternative."

"Oh, that's all right," she laughed. "Only it's such a damned silly way to kill a person. Isn't it. You come and try, Mr. Haynes. Any old time you like, in our dissecting room. I bet it takes you four shots at least."

"Has it struck you," said Haynes, "that a man stooping forward to play the piano is in an absolutely ideal position for such an injury?"

"Ah!" said Barbara. "I hadn't thought of that."

"No. But the police have." And Roderick Haynes felt that he had got some of his own back with compound interest.

It was eleven o'clock at night and the wind soughed plaintively in the small clump of cypress trees which marked the boundary of the New Cemetery.

Four or five indistinct figures were grouped around a newly-opened grave.

"By Jove, it's cold!" Haynes whispered to the small man standing beside him. But his companion said nothing; he merely pulled his woollen muffler more tightly round his throat, his hat more firmly down on his head, and shivered.

"I wish to the devil they'd come. This is a bit grim," the solicitor added.

Steps were heard crunching along the gravel path.

"Well, I'm here under protest," said a testy voice.

"Our orders, sir, an' we have to carry 'em out."

"Then, for God's sake, let's get on with it."

The Inspector spoke to the men around the grave and for ten minutes they were busy adjusting ropes.

"Now," said the foreman. And slowly the heavy coffin came to the surface.

The Inspector flashed his powerful torch: "Pine deal coffin. Number 73. Paul Marks. All correct."

He turned to a stout man standing just behind him: "You can identify the body at the mortuary, Albert."

"'Tain't our place then!" said Mr. Ohns, in an aggrieved tone.

"No, the borough mortuary. It's only quarter of a mile away. We don't want to lug the thing half across London. Get a move on, you chaps."

The trolley crunched over the gravel with the coffin perched precariously on the top; and in its wake followed Inspector Rose, Sir Chorley Bartle, Mr. Albert Ohns, Mr. Roderick Haynes, and Professor Andrew Gerstein.

Ten minutes later Albert Ohns had officially identified

the body—a superfluous proceeding in view of the fact that the wound was still clearly visible and the handiwork of Mr. Ohns was quite unmistakable.

“Now, Sir Chorley,” said Inspector Rose.

The eminent medico-legal specialist scowled.

“I’m doing nothing,” he said. “The defence have insisted on this needless examination; they have asked for certain things to be done, and they have the permission of the Home Office to do them. Professor Gerstein is acting for the defence and will do whatever he considers necessary. I shall watch in the interests of justice.”

Gerstein turned to Ohns. “Have you the jars?” he asked.

The man went to a large bag standing in the corner and produced six jars with glass stoppers.

“Good! Have they been properly prepared?”

Half an hour later the jars were sealed and labelled. Most of the time Sir Chorley regarded proceedings with indifference. The last five minutes excited his curiosity. He walked home with the inspector.

“Why the devil did he cut out bits of the fellow’s hands?” he exclaimed suddenly. “I’ve seen thousands of autopsies but I never saw that done before.”

“He’s a deep ‘un!” said the Inspector, and relapsed into silence. He was thinking of his warm bed and thankful that he was a married man with a nice comfortable wife to keep it warm. He had yet to find a case which could keep him awake with her beside him. They had been married for twenty-five years, and he had seen some pretty grim sights in his time. Inspector Rose was always sorry for single men. One of his favourite pieces of advice to youthful colleagues who were beginning to show signs of “nerves” was: “You get married to some nice plump lass, me lad. That’s a cure for cold feet.”

CHAPTER XVIII

THE FACE AT THE WINDOW

THE evening of the exhumation Andrew Gerstein dined with Roderick Haynes. It was a solitary evening for Anitra, for he had arranged to go straight from the Hospital. The day was closing in as the girl finished tea, and for some time after Betty had removed the tea things she sat in the half-light dreaming. At times she was conscious of the loneliness of her life, a loneliness for which his love could only partly compensate. With all his learning he was only a child, and she knew that he depended upon her for all the happiness that came to him outside his work. Andrew Gerstein had been devoted to his wife, and with her death the sunlight had gone from his life. He had deliberately and with finality pulled down the blinds.

For the first few years of Anitra's life he had scarcely noticed the child; or, if he did, she only emphasized the blank which represented his home life. The girl had been the occupation of a succession of indifferent nurses, some of whom had hoped to be able to fill the blank in the life of the absent-minded Professor. Then misfortune had come. An insidious feverish attack, which got worse; and when she recovered both legs were partly paralysed. But the cloud had a silver lining, for it drove the man from his selfish despondency to a passionate love for the helpless child.

It had happened when she was five years old; she was now twenty-one. Her attitude towards her father could only be described as maternal; her brain compensated for the physical defect, and she looked upon herself as his natural protector. If she had enjoyed perfect health the house could not have been better managed. She was a born mistress, and Betty and sundry charwomen served her with a whole-hearted loyalty which bore eloquent testimony to her quality. From the time of her illness her father had been

her nurse. During the daytime, when he was at work, Betty did whatever was necessary; when he was at home she would accept no other help. From childhood she had slept in his bedroom, and she continued to do so—it never occurred to either of them to make any other arrangement. Somebody had to sleep with her, and it was his place.

But to-night he was out. She was not, however, to be alone all the evening, for Barbara had promised to come and see her at nine o'clock. She was very anxious to get to know Barbara Elder; there was something very attractive to the helpless girl in the masterful efficiency of the young lady doctor.

It was almost dark in the room. She was just going to ring the bell for Betty to turn on the light when a sound at the window arrested her attention—a soft, shuffling noise as though a large cat were moving along the window-sill. She looked up. For a moment, in the subdued light, a face was clearly visible, pressed against the glass—a crafty face with narrow, slanting eyes, squat nose and projecting teeth. For a moment it gazed into the room and then vanished.

"Betty!" she cried. "Betty! There's someone in the garden."

And her voice rang through the silent house, but Betty did not come. In terror she rang the bell, again and again.

The girl came running down the passage from the kitchen.

"I'm sorry, miss. I were at the back door, an' a man came round the corner of the 'ouse. Fair scared me 'e did. Ask if I could tell 'im where the master was to-night. I said 'e was out, and went to the gate to make sure 'e'd gone. A furriner of some sort, with a yellow face."

"That's all right, Betty. Turn up the light, will you. And I think you might wheel me away from the window."

Anitra was scared. Obviously the man who had looked in at the window was interested in the movements of her father, and it gave a sinister twist to the mystery which shrouded the investigations he was making.

At nine o'clock Barbara arrived. She slipped off her fur coat.

"The wind is getting up and it's turned colder," she said.

"What is daddy doing to-night? He wouldn't tell me and it's most important that I should know. He's so forgetful."

"He has a late appointment with Mr. Haynes, to meet Sir Chorley Bartle and Inspector Rose."

"Ah! I thought it would be to-night. He doesn't like me to think about such things. He says earthworms have no place in the stars. But of course I knew. I made him take his warm muffler. Tell me something about your friend who is in trouble."

Barbara described Helen Heylet. "So," she concluded, "you can understand why I am perfectly sure that she never did it."

"Yes," Anitra said with a sigh. "I suppose freedom must be very difficult for some women. They're so much more impulsive than men—women are guided more by instinct than reason, and they don't know when to stop."

Barbara smiled at the youthful philosopher.

"I know," Anitra continued, "for I've never had any. You see, I've thought a great deal about it, and I've read lots of books."

"I suppose," said Barbara, "it will always be the same. We shall never learn to make omelets without breaking eggs. Pain and sorrow seem almost inseparable from the idea of birth; and, of course, we are in the birth pangs of a new conception of freedom."

A gust of wind rattled the windowpane and Anitra looked round apprehensively.

"I had a fright this evening," she said. "A man looked in at that window. He looked like a Chinaman. Then he went to the back door and asked where daddy was."

"Are you sure he was a Chinaman?"

"No, I only had a glimpse of him, but Betty said he was a foreigner with a yellow face, and his eyes suggested that he must be either a Chinaman or a Jap."

Barbara took a small torch from her pocket.

"One of the benefits of being a doctor," she said.

She walked to the window, threw it open, and switched on the light.

"Yes!" she said. "There are footmarks on the bed outside—very small, they might almost be a woman's. And the boots are unusual, they have practically no heel."

"I'm frightened," said Anitra. "When will daddy be coming back?"

"Not until pretty late, dear. But I will help you to bed, and stay with you until he returns."

Andrew Gerstein returned at half-past two.

CHAPTER XIX

THE WATCHER

FOR three days Andrew Gerstein and his assistants were engaged in analysing the contents of his six jars. An expert was watching proceedings for the authorities, and curiosity induced Sir Chorley to pay an occasional visit to the laboratory.

The metallic poisons were quickly excluded, also all the better known organic poisons. Sir Chorley regained some of his aplomb which had shown distinct signs of deserting him—a negative result would strengthen his case and enhance his reputation. Best of all, it would teach Andrew Gerstein not to meddle with matters which did not concern him.

Conceit had been the cause of Sir Chorley's deterioration. Life had possibly treated him too well, for he had been successful in whatever he had undertaken. It was a bitter grievance that the authorities only occasionally requisitioned his services, and one of the most severe blows of his career had been when the official post had been given to Bryan Priestley. In some ways it had not been entirely his fault. The demand for a dogmatic opinion, which has to be faced in the witness-box, had reacted on an over-sanguine

temperament: and the effect of his dictatorial style on the jury had fostered his conceit.

An indiscreet friend had once told him that he could lead any jury by the nose; and he now always regarded the jury box as a receptacle for twelve docile noses, waiting to be led by his eloquence. He could never be persuaded to retract a statement, once he had committed himself to an opinion; indeed, it is probable that, for him, the fact that he had made the statement set upon it the seal of an eternal verity.

On the fourth day after the exhumation Sir Chorley Bartle received a note from Andrew Gerstein, stating that he had found poison in the body, and proposed to demonstrate his results, for the benefit of the defence, at two o'clock that afternoon. If Sir Chorley cared to join them, Professor Gerstein would be pleased to see him. The experiments would be carried out at Plimmer's Farm, Dartford, Kent.

Sir Chorley snorted. But it was obvious that, in his own interests, he would have to attend this most unusual demonstration. He reached Plimmer's Farm at a quarter to two—his luncheon had been hurried, it was a bleak afternoon with a slight drizzle, his cigar had refused to draw properly, and altogether he felt that he possessed a legitimate grievance against things in general.

He was ushered into a small outhouse, where he was greeted by Andrew Gerstein and Roderick Haynes. A tall handsome girl—he recognized her as one of the St. Cyprian students—was standing talking to an equally tall young man, whilst an eminent K.C. was cracking jokes with a stout countryman in a rough tweed suit and gaiters—obviously the owner of the farm. In a small pen were two well-grown sheep under the care of a farm hand.

The farmer turned to the Professor: "Will two be enough?"

"Yes. The experiments yesterday were quite conclusive."

Sir Chorley intervened. "There may be two opinions on that question, Professor Gerstein; I gather that the chemical analysis was entirely negative."

The little man bowed. "That is so," he said.

"Then what the devil did you mean by saying in your letter that you had found poison?"

"Ah!" said the small man, and he patted one of the sheep affectionately.

"I did not come here to waste my time," said the offended expert.

"We can always learn," the other remarked sententiously.

"Damn it all, sir, I didn't come here to be insulted either. I can use my brains."

A hard look came into the eyes of the Professor.

"Ah!" he said. "Then there will be no need for me to explain anything to *you*. But you shall see my experiments. That is only fair."

He took a number of small, glass-stoppered bottles out of his pocket. Each was sealed and labelled.

"I have here," he said, "material extracted from various tissues and organs of the deceased man, Paul Marks. This afternoon I shall only deal with one of these samples, the others contain the same active principle in a lesser concentration."

He took a small hypodermic syringe from his pocket and broke the seal of one of the phials.

"Each of these sheep weighs approximately 45 kilograms. I propose to inject a small quantity of the substance which I have extracted, diluted with distilled water."

He signed to the farm labourer, who dragged forward a reluctant sheep. It stood trembling in the middle of the shed.

There was a shorn patch on the neck of the beast. The Professor pinched up a fold of skin, and deftly inserted the needle. Then he injected the solution.

The animal gave a slight start, and then stood still, as though surprised that things had been no worse. The Professor was intently regarding a stop watch which he had taken from his pocket. Suddenly the sheep shivered; its head began to rock rhythmically to and fro; then it took two or three uneven steps forward, the legs gave way and

it collapsed on its side. There were two or three convulsive movements, a short struggle for breath, and all was over.

The Professor looked up. "One minute, twenty-five seconds!" he said.

Sir Chorley gazed at the carcass.

"Protein shock," he said, "or some form of anaphylaxis." And he went to the window and contemplated the scenery.

The Professor took a larger syringe from his pocket and a phial containing an opalescent yellowish liquid. He filled the larger syringe, and then recharged the smaller one from his samples.

Sir Chorley turned round. "More experiments!" he exclaimed. "You can't expect to bring off your conjuring tricks every time, Gerstein."

The Professor approached the surviving sheep and injected the contents of both syringes.

"That ought to blast him," said Sir Chorley, facetiously.

For fifteen minutes Andrew Gerstein regarded his stop watch, and his companions gazed at the indignant beast.

"Nothing doing this time!" said Sir Chorley.

"Apparently not," said the Professor. "But give him another ten minutes."

And nothing happened.

"Well, I must be going now," said the famous pathologist, genially. "Allergy is a peculiar thing, one gets exactly the same differences in human beings. A most interesting demonstration, Gerstein! But I don't quite see the point, or any reason to change my original opinion as to the cause of death. Good afternoon, gentlemen."

The door banged.

"It's a pity he couldn't stay," said Andrew Gerstein, mildly. "It might have saved him quite a lot of annoyance in the future."

And he proceeded to explain his experiments for the benefit of the defence.

As they left the farm, a diminutive figure detached itself from some straw which was heaped against the side of the outbuilding. The collar of the long overcoat was turned

up at the neck, and the tweed cap was pulled well down over the eyes—between, could be seen a patch of yellow skin. The small man glanced hurriedly to right and left, then darted across a field and through the fence. He turned up a narrow lane and walked slowly towards the station. He made no attempt to catch the next train.

The Professor returned home at six o'clock and demanded two eggs for his tea. He had an evening's work before him in the laboratory and would get nothing else to eat.

"Good-bye, dear," Anitra said, as he prepared to go. And she turned up his coat collar and pulled an eccentric trilby hat firmly down on to his head.

"Now you won't lose it," she said. "Take care crossing the roads." Then she laughed. "It is a funny hat, daddy; anybody would recognize you by your hat."

"It's a very good hat," he affirmed. "It keeps the ears warm."

"What time will you be back, darling? I don't think I shall go to bed until you come."

"Probably between nine and ten o'clock. There's not much more to do."

The girl was restless. That face at the window! It seemed in some indefinite way to threaten their happiness; possibly even his life. But that was absurd—he was merely acting for the defence. It was not as though he were engaged in tracking down the murderer. But what an easy victim he would be! She always had a feeling that he was scarcely fit to be trusted out alone.

She rang the bell. The loneliness of the house oppressed her.

"What sort of an evening is it, Betty?"

"Orrid, miss! Damp and foggy. When I open the kitchen door just now it came in on me like a wet blanket!"

"Get your needlework and come and sit with me."

"S, miss."

"Draw the curtains right across, Betty."

"S, miss."

Through the long evening the two girls sat working together.

"It's nine o'clock, miss, would you like your Bovril?"

"Yes, Betty, I think I would. The master may not be in until ten. Poke up the fire . . . it's terribly cold."

She listened to the girl's heels tip-tapping down the passage. What was the matter with her? She had never been nervous before. Was it a warning? . . . Hark! What was that? Surely a faint knocking at the front door. Yes . . . there it was again. She rang the bell and Betty came hurrying down the passage.

"There's someone at the front door," she said.

"Yes, miss."

"Open it on the chain."

The girl returned. "There's nobody there," she said, "but, *my*, the fog is thick."

At ten o'clock the Professor had not returned.

"Will you go to bed, miss?"

"No, Betty. He'll be back soon."

The clock struck the half-hour, but still he did not come.

"I hope it's all right. He's very late."

At ten minutes to eleven they heard his key in the latch. He bustled into the room in a state of excitement.

"Dear, dear! What a night! Such a nasty accident, *my* dear! In the High Street. I had just crossed the road, when I heard a shout and a cry behind me. The omnibus had gone right over the man's leg, a compound fracture . . . the bone was sticking . . . er . . . He must have crossed just behind me. Dear, dear! The police are very efficient."

But Anitra was too relieved to have him back safely to bother very much about a street accident.

"Poor chap!" she said. "Betty is bringing you a cup of tea; then you can carry me up and put me to bed. It's cold down here and there's a fire in the bedroom."

Meanwhile at St. Chad's Hospital a youthful house-surgeon was fixing splints to a broken leg. He glanced up at the nurse who was assisting him.

"Compound!" he remarked. "A nasty smash!"

He inserted the last safety-pin and sprinkled some more chloroform on the mask which covered the yellow face.

"That'll do until we get him up to the theatre. I'll keep him under."

He ran his hands over the man's clothes.

"Hallo, Sister! You haven't got all his property. What's this?"

He turned back the man's coat, and drew a formidable clasp knife from an inner pocket.

"That's a pretty murderous weapon!" he exclaimed. "Stick it down on the list, Sister. 'One Chinaman with toothpick complete!'"

CHAPTER XX

THE EVE OF THE TRIAL

THE atmosphere of the butler's pantry was no longer tranquil.

"It's no use getting hysterical, Bessie," said Mr. Potter. "They want facts when you give evidence, not opinions. You say she never did it—that she couldn't. That's not evidence. Did you notice that she was very upset for several days? Yes. Did she receive letters which she was careful to burn? Yes. Did she own the knife which killed the Jew boy? Yes. That's all evidence, Miss Bessie, and it's evidence they want."

The girl cried miserably, and the susceptible heart of Mr. Potter was touched. He put his hand on her shoulder.

"Don't cry, my dear."

She shook herself free.

"Oh, get away," she exclaimed, "I hate you! You think she did it. But then you didn't know her not properly; cramped and starved as she were by that damp fish . . . sitting moping and helpless, upstairs."

"Now that's where you are wrong. He'd give his head to be able to think her innocent. But he's a man . . . and he uses his common sense. Women weren't intended to . . . they've been given a protective instinct for things that

are weak and helpless . . . they're not expected to use reason. Look at the way a woman'll stick to her kid, no matter what 'e's done. That's you, Bessie; you've a protective instinct for things in trouble."

"Then you think the mistress is a murderess," said the girl.

The butler held up his hand in protest.

"Steady, my dear; after all she's the mistress! I wouldn't go so far as to say that. There was undue provocation, possibly justifiable homicide."

"You can't even be honest," she retorted. "If she did what she's accused of it was murder, cold-blooded murder, and she's a murderess."

Mr. Potter was piqued. Bessie had never looked so attractive, but he realized that any attentions he might offer would not be well received. The moment was not propitious.

"Very well, my dear, let's change the subject and talk of something more pleasant."

And he tried to take her hand.

For a moment she contemplated his smug, self-satisfied face. Then she stood up and smacked it soundly.

"Oh!" she said, with a sigh of relief. "Now I feel much better."

The man flushed crimson. "You little devil!" he snapped. Then he recovered his balance and laughed.

"I'd sooner be smacked by you, my lass, than kissed by some I know," said Mr. Potter with obvious sincerity. "And if it does you good, you're welcome to do it again, I'm sure."

Aubrey Heylet sat brooding in front of the fire. As he would have expressed it, he had been having the very deuce of a time. He was a man with a temper, which had gradually been replaced by a constitutional laziness, and he could understand a person doing what Helen had obviously done. Of course it wasn't murder—justifiable homicide, and the world well rid of a slimy villain. But what would the jury

say? What view would the judge take in his summing up? And the worst of all was the demonstrative sympathy of men like Elder! Judson was fairly bad, but at any rate he adopted a reasonable view with regard to the culpability of the action. Then there was that cyclone Barbara Elder, who would not admit even the possibility of her having done it. Always after some fresh move to prove her innocence! Kate was the best of the bunch, for she came to see him, and didn't talk about it at all.

To add to his troubles had come the realization that he really loved Helen; as a natural corollary, that he had not treated her fairly, and was largely to blame for what had happened. Her bright, animated face haunted him. And sometimes, with the vision, would come another, of her standing on the fatal trap door with a hempen rope around her dainty neck. Resolves! What good were resolves, at such a time? But if ever he had the chance he would do something to make up to her for the past.

Mechanically he took a cigar from the box on the table beside him and snipped off the end.

But they would never hang a woman for a crime committed under such provocation.

He struck a match.

But they had hanged that woman in the Bywaters case!

Damn! The match had burnt his finger. He threw it into the fire, struck another and lit his cigar.

Henry Judson said she would be safe to get off if they put forward the plea of temporary insanity under extreme emotional stress. But Barbara Elder maintained that Ralph Bloxham would never admit such a plea. And now they had got an entirely new line of defence about which they were very reticent.

His cigar had gone out. He lit it again.

In any case the defence could not be in better hands. They had briefed Sir Hedly Gileat and John Temple. The Attorney-General was ill and Sidney James would be leading for the Crown. Like all their men he was always scrupulously fair in such cases.

Damn this cigar! He threw it into the fire and lit another. Would they put Helen in the box? That would be terrible. All his interviews with her had been terrible. The strain had been too much for her. Poor kid! He would take her away, after it was all over . . . a long sea voyage . . . new scenes . . . a second honeymoon . . . But that was, of course, if . . .

He must complain about these cigars—a poor lot considering what he had paid for them. He rang the bell and Potter brought in some whisky and a siphon.

"Thanks, Potter; you can lock up the house. I shall go to bed soon."

But Aubrey Heylet did not sleep that night.

CHAPTER XXI

PROSECUTION

THE trial of Helen Heylet was opened before Mr. Justice Bloxham at the Old Bailey on Tuesday, 20th November, 19—. From the moment of opening, the court was crowded and hundreds of people could not gain admission. The case had aroused interest, not only because of the social status of the accused, but also because of its bearing upon the serious problem of blackmail, which at that time was exercising the public mind. Rumours were abroad which seemed to indicate some organization for carrying on this cowardly practice, and there was a general feeling of insecurity.

Public sympathy was with the accused, even in the face of a widespread conviction that she had committed the action for which she was arraigned. It must be added that the sympathy did not extend to the husband, who was regarded as largely responsible for what had happened.

Aubrey Heylet was keenly aware of this attitude as he made his way to the seat reserved for him near the solicitor for the defence. As he passed down the crowded court

hostile looks greeted him on every side, and from amongst the packed spectators came a sound, faint but unmistakable—the whisper of a suppressed hiss. He scarcely noticed, he was like a sleep-walker, his senses were numbed. His mind was concentrated on one thing alone—the moment when Helen would stand facing him in that fateful dock. What did he care what people thought? Would she blame him too? Would she pass from that dock to the condemned cell? Surely never had a selfish man reaped such a harvest of his folly!

Roderick Haynes beckoned him to his seat:

"We are very hopeful," he whispered, "but, of course, it will be a fight."

Aubrey glanced around the Court. Gileat and Temple were in their places, the former with his long assertive nose buried in a mass of documents. Sidney James had just arrived—every inch a scholar and a gentleman. Bryan Fyfold, with the face of a discontented bulldog, was assisting him, and Heylet remembered that he had a reputation for bullying witnesses. Haynes and Temple were joking together, and there was nothing in the comportment of these leading actors to indicate the drama in which they were to play a part.

In the jury-box it was a different matter. The majority of the twelve good men and true were obviously oppressed by the responsibility of their task and the unwonted publicity of their position—the foreman was self-consciously alert and determined to do his duty without fear or favour. He was a draper of repute; his pocket would suffer, but he was fulfilling his obligation to society as a good citizen should. He viewed with stern disapproval distinct signs of levity on the part of two younger members of the jury.

The Judge entered the Court. It was as though a squad of guardsmen had been called to attention, and the tense silence struck terror to the heart of Aubrey Heylet, for he knew that the moment he dreaded had come. As the hum of renewed life spread through the Court he buried his face in his hands. He could not face her before all these

curious eyes, indeed for a moment he scarcely realized where he was. He heard voices, but they seemed far away in the distance—a voice which droned some accustomed formula, a hum of suppressed excitement, a woman's voice—faint and indistinct . . . she was pleading “not guilty”.

He glanced up and their eyes met—blue eyes which he knew so well . . . he had given her a dressing-gown once because it matched them . . . blue eyes with black rings around them, contrasting with the deadly pallor of her face. For a moment her lips quivered, and then she looked away without a sign of recognition. He was not forgiven.

He glanced at the Judge. No plea of justification would carry weight with such a man. The mouth was straight and firm, the eyes cold and critical, the lined face inflexible, and the broad, high forehead calm and dispassionate. . . .

“My Lord, and gentlemen of the jury”—it was Sidney James opening for the Crown—“My lord, and gentlemen of the jury, it is my duty to lay before you, as simply and as clearly as I can, the facts of this case in support of the serious charge upon which the prisoner at the bar is arraigned.

“The prisoner is charged with the murder of a man, Paul Marks, on the evening of Tuesday, October the third, at some time between six-thirty and six-fifty. It will be well for me to say at once that the man cannot be regarded as a desirable character—indeed, as subsequent evidence will show, he was at the time of his death engaged in a course of systematic blackmail on the prisoner. It will be shown that he had in his possession an objectionable photograph which seriously compromised her reputation. How the photograph was obtained we do not know, but it will be proved that frequent letters passed between the prisoner and the deceased. The contents of some of these letters can only be surmised, but it is reasonable to suppose—in view of those which we have before us—that they too were connected with the subject of the photograph.

“At midday on October the third, evidence will show that the prisoner received a letter from the deceased. We do

not know the purport of that letter for, as was her custom, the prisoner immediately burnt it; but it is certain that at 6.30 in the evening she visited the deceased in his flat. Twenty minutes later she was seen by the hall-porter to hurry from the building.

"At eight o'clock that same evening a charwoman, who worked for the deceased, entered the flat to tidy the sitting-room and make up the fire. On the floor, beside the piano stool, she found the dead body of Paul Marks. Apparently she did not touch the body, but rushed from the flat and summoned assistance. The corpse was huddled up on the floor, in a semi-prone position, with the right arm outstretched and the left doubled up under the chest. The hilt and a small portion of the blade of a small jewelled Italian stiletto could be seen protruding from the nape of the neck. Subsequent evidence will show that the weapon had pierced the vertebral column, virtually severing the spinal cord. Evidence will be given that this stiletto is the property of the prisoner.

"When the flat was subsequently searched by the police, a photograph and letters were found which clearly show that the prisoner was the victim of blackmail at the hands of the deceased. Late that same evening she was interrogated by the police. It is only fair to state that, at the time, she was in a highly emotional condition. She was informed that Paul Marks had been found dead in his flat, and, after the usual warning, was asked if she could supply any information which would assist the police in their investigations. She then made a statement in which she accused the deceased of possessing hypnotic powers—a fact substantiated by two witnesses at the coroner's inquest. She maintained that she was under his influence, and that on two occasions she had been reduced to a condition when she was virtually irresponsible for her actions. She further stated that on the day in question she received a letter from the deceased asking her to go to his flat at 6.30 in the evening, that she had felt compelled to go, and that after some conversation he had played the piano. She added that when she left his

apartments he was still playing the piano. When questioned about the stiletto, she admitted that for some time she had been carrying it about with her for protection. She maintained, however, that for some days she had not seen it—it had disappeared.

"It is obvious that such a statement leaves many gaps, and that these gaps are highly significant. No mention is made of the photograph, there is no suggestion of blackmail, and no explanation as to the disappearance of the dagger. On the other hand much of her story is supported by actual evidence—the reception of the letter, the time of the visit, the hypnotic power of the deceased, his ability to play the piano.

"Medical evidence will show that the deceased died as the result of a wound in the neck—a wound produced by a weapon known to be the property of the prisoner and, by her own confession, a weapon which she was in the habit of carrying about on her person. The nature of the wound is peculiar. From the circumstances of the case, it must be pointed out that such a wound might well be inflicted on a person stooping forward in the act of playing the piano.

"You will probably have no difficulty in coming to the conclusion that the deceased died as a result of this wound. Who was responsible for its infliction?

"In this case we can definitely exclude any possibility of the wound having been self-inflicted. If the prisoner is not guilty, somebody else must have perpetrated the crime subsequent to her leaving the flat. In support of such an assumption we have not a shred of evidence. It is true that from seven o'clock to seven-thirty, as was his custom, the porter was in the basement having his supper. But the lift attendant was on the spot, and nobody else was observed to enter the flat. There is no evidence that any property was disturbed, there are no signs of a struggle, and there are no finger-prints.

"It may be pointed out, as you will hear in the evidence of the hall-porter, that the prisoner was wearing gloves.

"Such is a brief summary of the evidence that will be

put before you. I need not warn you to dismiss from your minds anything that you may have heard of this case before you came into Court; and I ask you to apply your minds to the candid consideration of the evidence presented to you here. The next thing I would ask you to bear in mind is that it is for the Crown to make out the case of guilt; that suspicion will not do; that probability is not sufficient; that it is upon the weight of evidence dispassionately considered, that your verdict must be based."

Aubrey Heylet gazed helplessly at the jury. How hopeless and futile it all seemed! What defence could there be to such an indictment? He listened listlessly to the corroborative evidence, evidence which seemed to leave no loophole even for cross-examination, evidence damning and conclusive. Even his own servants had been subpœnæd by the prosecution and their reluctant evidence was the most damning of all.

Bryan Fyfold extracted the evidence from Bessie Chadnage like a dentist extracting teeth. He did not bully her, he did not even ask to treat her as a hostile witness—there was no need. The mistress had been very upset for some time—she was sleeping badly. She received letters which she burnt directly she had read them. The handwriting on the envelopes resembled the handwriting on the paper produced in Court. Her mistress had been very fond of the deceased, at least they had gone out a great deal to dances together. The stiletto was the property of her mistress—for some time it had been on her writing-table then it had disappeared. She had not seen it for a week or two before the tragedy.

Cross-examined by John Temple, Bessie agreed that her mistress was the last person in the world to commit a violent act, she was always kind and considerate. She hated the sight of blood, and on one occasion had fainted when one of the maids had put her hands through a pane of glass.

Mrs. Bloggs created a diversion. She stated that she found the body whilst tidying up the room—that she was sure it was murder directly she saw the blood all over the place—

that he was a kind gentleman, and never again would she find such a situation.

"Had you been drinking?" from John Temple.

Mrs. Bloggs denied the soft impeachment with indignation.

"Would it surprise you to hear that the gentleman you found on the landing states that you were smelling strongly of alcohol?"

Mrs. Bloggs would be very surprised, and *he* would be no gentleman.

"Then, how do you account for your statement that there was blood all over the place? According to the police and police surgeon there had been practically no bleeding from the wound."

But Mrs. Bloggs gave it up. It was murder; she had bought a new bonnet for the trial; there was always blood with murders; and, if there was no blood, something ought to be done about it.

She retired from the witness-box protesting volubly.

Inspector Rose testified to finding a photograph and some letters in a locked drawer of the desk belonging to the deceased. The letters were from the prisoner, and were evidently replies to threats with regard to the photograph. It was obvious that the prisoner was anxious to prevent her husband from seeing the photograph.

Evidence was then given to prove the authenticity of the letters, and, with the photograph, they were handed to the jury.

"Sir Chorley Bartle."

The expert bustled into the witness-box, pushed the Bible on one side, and took the oath by affirmation.

He was a pathologist at St. Cyprian's Hospital. He was a Master of Arts, a Doctor of Medicine, a Member of the Royal College of Surgeons, and a Licentiate of the Royal College of Physicians. For 35 years he had been conducting post-mortem examinations. On Wednesday, 4th October, at 11 a.m., he had performed an autopsy on the body of the deceased. The body was that of a strong, well-nourished

man. All the internal organs were healthy. The stomach was removed and its contents analysed for poison, but no trace could be detected. There was a wound in the neck passing between the second and third cervical vertebrae and extending into the spinal cord. There was a slight hæmorrhage along the track of the wound and the central part of the spinal cord was severely damaged, the knife having passed right through its substance and impinged on the bone which formed the anterior wall of the canal. The injury to the spinal cord was the cause of death. Such a wound was incompatible with existence and would cause practically instantaneous respiratory and circulatory failure.

Hedley Gileat stood up.

"You have had a considerable experience of wounds, I believe, Sir Chorley."

The great man bowed.

"From your considerable experience, did it occur to you that there was less hæmorrhage than is usual in such cases?"

The expert shook his head.

"No, there are comparatively few blood-vessels in that region."

"Would it surprise you to hear that a similar injury, inflicted on a dog, produced considerable bleeding into the spinal canal?"

"No. Possibly a small blood-vessel was injured."

"Can you inform the gentlemen of the jury what the state of the blood was in the right side of the heart?"

"There was a good deal of clot."

"Any signs that the blood had clotted during life?"

"I noticed signs which might suggest ante-mortem clotting, but too indefinite for any positive conclusions to be drawn."

"You state, I believe, that an examination for poison was made, but no evidence could be found of any known poison."

"That is so."

"You are, I believe, a great authority on poisons?"

"I have seen a great many cases of death due to poison."

"And doubtless you keep yourself informed of all the recent developments with regard to this important subject."

Sir Chorley agreed.

"You did not consider it necessary to examine the liver or spleen for signs of poison?"

"No."

"What is the most recent authoritative work on the poisons published in this country?"

Sir Chorley hesitated as though he feared a trap.

"Andrew Gerstein's book on the alkaloids," he said, with obvious reluctance.

"There is, I believe, an appendix to that book?"

The specialist looked puzzled.

"I presume you have read this authoritative work?"

"Er . . . er . . . I have glanced through it."

"Doubtless you intend to study it more thoroughly at your leisure?"

Sir Chorley caressed his chin . . . his face was red.

"That is my intention," he said.

Hedley Gileat looked at the jury, then back at the uneasy expert.

"You probably are aware that it was published two years ago?"

"I thought more recently."

"Possibly you are referring to the second edition."

He passed the book to the Judge. "The date is on the title-page, my lord," he said. The Judge opened it at the title-page and handed the book to the jury.

"Your observation is quite correct, Sir Hedley," he observed.

"Then I may take it that you have not read the appendix on snake poisons?"

"I have not." Sir Chorley began to feel that his reputation was suffering; he seemed to be off-colour, almost out of his depth.

"Just one more question. Did you notice any other signs of injury on the body of the deceased?"

"There was a small, punctured wound a quarter of an inch away from the main lesion. It was quite superficial and of no significance."

"No significance, in your opinion, I suppose you mean?" the Judge interposed.

"Yes, my lord."

"And that was all?"

"Yes."

"Would it surprise you to hear that there was a small bruise, about the size of a sixpence, on the palm of the right hand?"

Sir Chorley fumbled through his notes. "I have no record of it."

"Ah!" said Sir Hedley Gileat, and once more he looked at the jury.

"Thank you, Sir Chorley. That will do."

To the surprise of many present Sidney James did not re-examine the witness.

CHAPTER XXII

THE DEFENCE

As Sir Chorley left the box there was a buzz of excitement which was sternly rebuked by the Judge. It was a Court of Justice, not a place of entertainment; if there were any further departures from decent behaviour he would have the Court cleared. But the air of suppressed excitement which pervaded the place was not amenable to judicial censure; people realized that the defence intended to fight, and it was obvious that they were going to fight the charge on somewhat unusual lines.

Hedley Gileat was looking well-pleased, John Temple was smiling, and Sir Chorley looked like an affronted turkey-cock. For the first time people began to wonder whether Helen Heylet had really committed the crime, and the jury were alert and interested.

To the surprise of everybody present, the first witness for the defence was Inspector Johns of Scotland Yard.

"Have many cases of blackmail come to the notice of the authorities lately?"

"Yes."

"Has anything unusual occurred in connection with these cases?"

The Inspector pondered for a short time. "Yes. Three successful blackmailers have committed suicide during the last eighteen months."

"By what means?"

"Two by gas and one by drowning."

"Have you any explanation to offer for this strange intervention on the part of Providence?"

"No. There was no apparent reason."

"There was no doubt that these cases were suicide?"

"No. The medical evidence was decisive."

"Any suggestion of foul play?"

"No."

"Thank you, Inspector."

"Albert Ohns."

Mr. Ohns stepped into the box and took the oath, sealing it with a pious kiss which awoke the echoes of the silent Court. He handed the book back to the official and leaned his ponderous arms on the rail in front of him.

He was wearing a clean collar, and that was significant.

He was Albert Ohns, post-mortem room attendant at St. Cyprian's Hospital. He had been there for forty years. He remembered perfectly well the autopsy performed on the body of the deceased. He never made notes—he remembered things. He remembered that some blood had got into the palm of the right hand, and that he had forced it open so as to have it cleaned. He noticed a bruise about the size of a button—not a coat button, not a waistcoat button, maybe a trousers button. It was a peculiar bruise, a funny colour; he had once before seen a similar bruise on the wrist of a chap that was drowned in the Thames.

Bryan Fyfold arose to cross-examine.

"Now, Mr. Ohns, I want you to be extremely careful."

"Just what I allus says to the chaps when they fust comes into my department," observed Mr. Ohns, genially. "It's terrible easy to make a slip . . . wi' a knife . . . an' that means blood poisoning."

"Will you inform the gentlemen of the jury why you did not point out this bruise to Sir Chorley Bartle at the time of the autopsy?"

"'Cos I done it once, an' once bit is twice shy. Very rude, 'e wos!"

"Then it was some time later that you recollected the bruise and remedied your oversight?"

"It were noticed directly 'e finish. Young Bert was cleaning up. 'Wash it orf,' I says. 'Wash it orf yerself,' says 'e, 'fer I carn't."

A titter ran round the Court and Bryan Fyfold sat down.

Various witnesses then gave evidence with regard to the exhumation, identification, and other matters.

"Professor Andrew Gerstein."

The small man shuffled into the witness-box, looking as though it was only owing to an oversight on the part of the prosecution that he had not been placed in the dock. He stated, with reluctance, that he was a Doctor of Medicine, a Doctor of Science, a Doctor of Philosophy, a Doctor of Law, and a Fellow of the Royal Society. That he was a great authority on poisons he absolutely refused to admit—the subject was too vast for anyone to be a *great* authority. He had studied them, yes—he had written about them, yes—people had been good enough to regard him as an authority—he had written the book produced in Court—it was regarded as a reasonable treatise on the subject.

At about midnight on 20th October he had performed an autopsy on the exhumed body of the deceased. An autopsy had evidently been performed previously. There was a deep punctured wound in the neck extending to the spinal canal. The cord had been partially severed. On the palm of the right hand was a bruise about half an inch in diameter. He had removed the portion of skin involved and an inch of

healthy tissue around it. He had also removed a similar portion from the left hand where there had been no bruise. These he had placed in carefully prepared jars and sealed. He had also removed portions of the liver, spleen and kidneys, which he had dealt with in a similar manner.

He had spent three days examining these tissues. He had tested for all the well-known inorganic and organic poisons; the result of this examination had been negative—. He had prepared a concentrated extract from the tissues—this extract when injected into mice and rabbits produced death. The extract from the palm of the right hand contained the active principle in far greater concentration than that from the internal organs but it was present in all samples except that taken from the left hand. From the palm of the right hand he had succeeded in obtaining a practically pure extract of the active material—it was highly toxic for laboratory animals and in its action resembled snake venom. He had confirmed his experiments on sheep, and found that .00005 milligram per kilo of body weight was a fatal dose. This was far more powerful than any known snake venom. In his opinion it was a highly potent concentrate prepared by some special process, and was the actual cause of the death of the deceased.

In his opinion the dagger had been inserted either when the victim was unconscious, or immediately after death.

He was cross-examined by Sidney James.

"Have you had any practical experience, Professor Gerstein, of death by snake-bite?"

"No. But I have worked with dried snake venoms from various parts of the world."

"Do you consider that the physiological tests, which you have carried out, are absolutely conclusive proof of the cause of death?"

The little man shifted his position uneasily: "They are very suggestive," he said.

"Then I may take it that they are not absolutely conclusive?"

"Not absolutely."

"There is, I believe, a condition known as 'anaphylaxis', also a phenomenon which is called 'protein shock'?"

"That is so."

"And snake venom is of the nature of a protein poison?"

"Yes."

"Then you cannot absolutely exclude the possibility of some form of anaphylactic shock in your experiments?"

"Experiments were carried out to exclude this possible fallacy. In my opinion they were conclusive."

"I believe, in the experiments carried out at Plimmer's Farm, the second sheep survived a massive dose of your extract. Can you explain this?"

"Yes. I suspected a certain type of snake venom. Fortunately there happened to be in London a small quantity of anti-venom for this particular poison. I injected into the second sheep a hundred times the fatal dose of the suspected venom together with an equivalent quantity of anti-venom. As I expected, they neutralized one another."

"What particular snake venom did you suspect?"

"That of the South American snake. *Lachesis lanceolatus*—the 'fer-de-lance'."

"May I ask upon what you based your surmise?"

"Upon the fact that the blood had obviously clotted very rapidly; and, as Sir Chorley Bartle observed, there were signs of ante-mortem clotting in the heart and great vessels of the deceased. The poison of the fer-de-lance produces coagulation of the blood more rapidly than the venom of any other snake, except, possibly, the rattlesnake."

"Why then did you suspect the fer-de-lance rather than the rattlesnake?"

"Because many years ago a process was discovered by which the potency of *Lachesis* venom would be considerably raised."

"I understand that certain information was supplied by you with the application for an exhumation?"

"Yes. It was based upon a previous autopsy carried out by Sir Chorley Bartle upon a blackmailer who was found drowned. There were certain points in the notes on this

case which seemed to me to link it up with the present case in a very significant manner. In my opinion that death was also due to snake venom."

"Did you subsequently perform an autopsy on this body also?"

"Yes."

"Did you find any evidence of snake poison?"

"No. Considerable decomposition had taken place, and the venom is destroyed by bacterial action."

"Thank you, Professor Gerstein."

At the conclusion of the evidence for the defence the Court adjourned.

CHAPTER XXIII

VERDICT

At the resumption, Sir Hedley Gileat addressed the Court.

"My lord, gentlemen of the jury—you have heard the evidence brought forward in support of the charge against the prisoner; you have heard also the evidence for the defence. It will be obvious to you at the outset that here we have a serious difference of opinion between two experts of repute. For the prosecution it is maintained that the death of the deceased was due to a wound in the neck caused by a stiletto which is acknowledged to be the property of the prisoner. That such a wound was present is not denied by the defence. Their contention is that it was produced after death in order to divert attention from the true perpetrator of the outrage.

"To substantiate such a suggestion it is necessary for the defence to bring forward some alternative cause of death. You have heard the evidence of Sir Chorley Bartle, you have heard his statement that there were signs of clotting which might have occurred before death. He has given as his opinion that it was too indefinite for any positive conclusion to be drawn. You have heard that there was a small punctured wound in the neck, near to the main lesion, to

which he attached no importance. You have heard that there was a small bruise on the palm of the right hand, which he entirely failed to notice. Gentlemen, I maintain that in these three phenomena, which he had either lightly brushed aside or altogether neglected, we find a clue to the actual cause of death.

"The prisoner is a frail and delicately nurtured woman; yet the prosecution would have you believe that, with the deceased on his guard, she was able to commit an act which requires not only manual dexterity but also considerable physical power. I say advisedly 'on his guard'. For what else can that apparently trivial wound mean except that the first attempt was abortive? It was a slip, a false start, which must have placed the intended victim intensely on the alert.

"Secondly, I would call your attention to the fact that in cases of sudden death it is not customary to find ante-mortem clotting in the heart and great vessels. So unusual is this phenomenon that it immediately arrested the attention of the eminent Professor who has given evidence before you. Then we have this most unusual type of bruise in a most unusual situation—a bruise of sufficient significance to have fixed itself in the bucolic mind of a man who has spent forty years of his life in the sordid environment of the post-mortem room.

"I would suggest that the cause of death was so apparent that it induced the eminent specialist, who has given evidence for the prosecution, to neglect signs which under other conditions would have appeared to him of grave significance. For here we have presumptive evidence that the crime could not have been committed in the manner alleged; and, further, we have suggestive clues as to the true cause of death.

"You have heard, gentlemen, what Professor Gerstein discovered in his subsequent investigations, and you will remember the weight of authority which lies behind his evidence. From the tissues of the right hand—where was this most significant bruise—and from the liver, spleen and

kidneys, in a lesser degree, he obtained an active poison of the nature of snake venom. Experiments carried out on animals confirmed his discovery. My learned friend has suggested that these results may be due to a condition known as anaphylaxis or protein shock—a phenomenon produced by the injection of foreign proteins into the animal body. Professor Gerstein, with conspicuous restraint and moderation, states that in his opinion such a possibility has been excluded by definite experiments.

"I would suggest that Paul Marks was murdered, at some period subsequent to the visit of the prisoner to his flat, by the injection of snake venom into the palm of the hand. I would further suggest that it may be regarded as a sequel to the remarkable chain of events outlined by Inspector Johns—a sequel to this strange sequence of mishaps which have overtaken men guilty of blackmail in this great metropolis. That the others died in the same way we have no evidence to prove, but there are certain points which are highly suggestive, more especially in connection with the drowning case mentioned by Professor Gerstein. With regard to the wound in the neck, I submit that it was inflicted after death in order to divert attention from the true cause. It must be obvious that a criminal, possessed of such a valuable weapon of destruction as concentrated snake venom, would use every means in his power to prevent its discovery.

"Gentlemen, it is a great responsibility to be called from the ordinary avocations of life to decide upon such momentous questions. I feel confident that the evidence we have been able to lay before you is of such a nature that you will have no difficulty in finding the prisoner not guilty of the offence with which she is charged. It is for the prosecution to prove their case. It is our contention that they have signally failed to do so—that the principal witness for the Crown, upon whose evidence their case must inevitably rest, has proved himself unworthy of credence either with regard to fact or interpretation.

"Gentlemen, I have watched with increasing hope the intelligence and careful consideration which you have brought to bear upon this difficult case. I feel confident that I can leave the reputation and life of my client in your safe keeping."

In his final speech for the Crown, Sidney James pointed out that the defence had failed to establish any definite connection between the present case and the others which had been mentioned. They had failed to find any trace of this mysterious venom in the only body which they had examined in order to support their hypothesis. They had put forward a fantastic theory to contest the obvious implications of facts attested by credible witnesses. The gentlemen of the jury would doubtless have noticed a certain hesitancy in the attitude of the expert witness for the defence—a hesitancy which his learned friend had attributed to "moderation and restraint", but which might equally well be the result of lack of conviction.

The defence were relying upon such evidence to support a theory which for fantastic incredibility could scarcely have been surpassed in the long history of the Court. To establish their case it was necessary to traduce the evidence of one who for over thirty years had been accepted as an authority in such matters. A desperate case called for desperate measures, but never before had he contemplated such a monstrous red herring as the defence had fabricated and trailed before their eyes. He submitted that neither in evidence nor in cross-examination had the defence elicited any facts which materially affected the charge as formulated in his opening speech.

The prisoner in the dock shivered. Did he really believe her guilty? To her distracted mind his words seemed to neutralize all the efforts that had been made on her behalf. Andrew Gerstein had not the dogmatic assurance to carry the jury with him, and Sidney James had neutralized any effect which might have been produced on their stolid brains by Hedley Gileat. The story *was* a fantastic one—*she* could see that . . . and they would feel the same. How could anybody expect twelve tradesmen, who measured things

by the yard and weighed them by the pound, to accept a theory so far outside the range of their daily experience?

Mr. Justice Bloxham commenced his charge to the jury at two o'clock. It occupied less than an hour. He outlined the facts of the case, facts apparently so simple and obvious that they seemed capable of only one interpretation. Such had been the conclusion of the eminent specialist who had been selected to ascertain the cause of death. "There is always a danger, gentlemen, in the obvious—a danger that it will render the mind less alert to other facts which may bear upon the case. It has been shown by the defence that three such facts, to which they attach considerable importance, were disregarded by the pathologist who examined the body of the deceased in the first instance. It is for you, gentlemen, to consider to what extent these phenomena bear upon the problem before you. I would call your special attention to these three points—the small punctured wound, which is held to be incompatible with the commission of the crime by the accused; the clotting of the blood before death, which is said to indicate the alternative theory with regard to death; the bruise on the hand, which must possess great significance if you accept the evidence of Professor Gerstein.

"It has been pointed out to you that the Professor was not inclined to be dogmatic in his statement with regard to the cause of death. Gentlemen, such caution is habitual with men who have made a profound study of any subject. The more a man knows, the less is he inclined to be dogmatic. We have, however, his carefully considered opinion that death was due to snake venom. How administered he does not venture to suggest.

"If, in your opinion, this is the cause of death, then it is perfectly obvious that the prisoner did not commit the deed. It is scarcely credible that, after achieving her object, she would proceed to an action which must inevitably fix the responsibility for the crime upon herself."

"The problem which you have to face is therefore a comparatively simple one, for it turns upon the view you take with regard to the conflicting expert evidence as to the cause of death. If, in your opinion, death was due to the wound in the neck, you must ask yourselves whether the prisoner was responsible for that wound. If you are convinced, by the evidence before you, that the prisoner committed the crime with which she is charged, it is your solemn duty to deliver your verdict accordingly. If, on the other hand, you are satisfied that death was caused by some other means—that the evidence submitted by the defence is substantially correct—then it is your duty to find the prisoner not guilty."

The jury retired to consider their verdict at five minutes to three. They had returned into Court twenty minutes later. The Clerk turned towards the jury-box:

"Gentlemen, have you agreed upon your verdict?"

"We find the prisoner not guilty," said the foreman.

There was a half-stifled cry and Helen Heylet fell fainting into the arms of a wardress standing beside her. For a moment there was silence, then the sound of applause, sternly suppressed.

"Gentlemen," said the Judge. "It only remains for me to express my grateful sense of the attention and care you have given to the case, and to say that I entirely concur with your verdict."

CHAPTER XXIV

CONSEQUENCES

THE girl threw her coat and hat into a convenient chair and faced the man.

"Well," said Peter. "What about it?"

Barbara held out her left hand.

"I always keep my promises," she laughed.

"Is that all, or do you feel you really want to?"

"I hate sentiment, Peter. But I think you are rather a dear," she said casually.

He slipped the ring back into his pocket.

"I don't know," he said. "It's more or less a risk on those terms. I suppose I am a sentimental ass, but I should like a little more enthusiasm. Don't you think 'rather a dear' is a bit lukewarm—Laodicean? You see, I look upon marriage as something intimate; it means all sorts of things that don't belong to ordinary, everyday life—it isn't merely companionship with toleration."

The girl flushed. "Of course, if you look at it like that, it does seem a farce; bottles and babies are a bit out of my line except as medical assets."

Peter sighed. "I was afraid you felt like that about it. It may be old-fashioned, but I think I would rather wait—you see, I've been thinking a good deal lately, what with Helen and all that. It would be terrible to make a mistake."

"What a dear old sobersides it is!"

"Yes," he agreed, "but it'll come one day. And then . . . by Jove!"

"Don't you be too sure. I might fall in love with somebody else."

"I'd sooner you did that *before* than *after*."

"I don't believe you really care."

"You know that's not true, Babs, but love is too precious to be turned into a gamble. It's hard to wait, but it would be harder, far harder, the other way."

She slipped out of the chair and collected her coat and hat.

"Is that all?" she said.

"Yes."

He waited irresolutely until the door banged. Then he sat down on an untidy heap of papers, which had overflowed into the arm-chair, and buried his face in his hands. He knew that he had done right . . . but it was damned hard. Helen's face had haunted him ever since the trial . . . the folly of marriage without love . . . still, it was damned hard. He

picked up a book and opened it. For an hour he gazed at the page before him; the letters twisted themselves into fantastic shapes, but at the end of that time he had not read a word.

Barbara was piqued. She was not accustomed to having her favours refused, least of all by Peter; moreover, it looked rather as though he had been playing with her. She had never really understood him and to-night his motives were entirely beyond her comprehension. For she had always looked upon his love as a thing to be counted on—her property. Between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries there is a great gulf fixed; and, for some reason or other, Peter was a throw-back to the Victorians. He believed in homes, not hotels; in friends, not acquaintances; in children, not baby Austins; in the sanctity of marriage, not divorce reform. He was a very absurd person! To him, Helen Heylet, standing in the dock, had represented fate, she stood there as a witness against marriage inspired by wrong motives.

What Barbara did not realize was that for a few moments the issue had been in her own hands—the slightest display of real affection would have drawn him to her feet, for he craved for her as a traveller in a thirsty land craves for water. But that was exactly what she did not want—he was to be companion, pal, *bon camarade*, her cavalier to fetch and carry; and, as a reward, snacks . . . it would have to be snacks still. For the moment sex was merely a philosophical abstraction in the mind of Barbara Elder. Still, she was annoyed, and it would have been well for the Reverend George Elder had he studied the barometer before delivering himself on the subject of Helen Heylet. For Helen was staying at the Vicarage, and the Reverend George did not like it.

"I think Helen could take a little meat this evening, George, she seems much better," said Kate. "But only give her very little. Barbara will take it up."

The Reverend George was an expert with the steel. He drew the carving knife across it sharply five or six times; then he carved with dignified deliberation for the family

and Helen. He helped himself generously to vegetables and commenced his meal.

For ten minutes the atmosphere was calm—ominously calm.

"Now that the parlour-maid has left the room, I should like to say, Kate, that I strongly disapprove of what you have done. You invite into our house a woman who, but for a very ingenious defence, might now be in the condemned cell; you encourage her in her spirit of opposition to her husband by offering her the shelter of our roof, when she has refused his; you aid and abet Barbara in her defiance of my authority; you compromise my reputation as Vicar of an important West-End parish."

A tear trickled down Kate's cheek and mingled with the gravy on her plate.

"Have you ever realized, Pater," said Barbara, "what a humbug you are? No wonder the Church is losing touch with the people. How can you hope for respect when you preach one thing and practise another? Ever since I was a kid I've listened to you preaching about forgiveness, self-sacrifice, and mercy. When have you ever practised any of these qualities?"

Kate was sobbing. "Don't, Barbara dear," she implored. "He doesn't mean what he says."

But Barbara was not to be stopped.

"Oh, yes, he does. He's a tyrant and a hypocrite, and it's only because you are a saint that you have put up with it all these years."

George Elder choked with indignation: "Barbara, I must ask you to leave the table."

Barbara deliberately finished her meat, kissed her mother, and went up to Helen.

"Well, that's that!" she said. "First Peter, then Pater. For the moment I am not in demand. I shall go into the garden and eat hairy caterpillars."

Helen gazed at her with large, troubled eyes.

"Is it my fault, dear?"

"Good Lord, no! Pater and I have scrapped ever since

I was in the cradle; and as for Peter, he's an antique which won't be renovated—no, that's not fair, he's too good for this imperfect world."

Helen stretched out her hand to the girl.

"You've been jolly good to me," she said. "If it hadn't been for you they might have found me guilty. Was I guilty, Babs? I sometimes feel that for weeks I have not been responsible for my actions. His eyes haunt me still."

She shivered and drew the soft woollen wrap more closely around her.

"No dear, the verdict was a good one—you had nothing to do with it."

"But who did it, Babs? I sometimes feel that I shall never be happy again until that is discovered."

Barbara laughed rather bitterly. "The police are working at it. They say that they have clues, and they were most emphatic that they did not want any outside interference. Modern efficiency leaves no place for amateur detectives. In a way it's natural; they don't want the birds scared away and they do want the credit."

"Have you any ideas?"

"Not exactly, but I know where I should begin. Helen, it's a shame to bother you. But why did you tell Mr. Haynes that you gave Marks the pearls?"

"Because I did."

"But, Helen dear. Aubrey found the pearls in your safe!"

For a moment the invalid looked puzzled . . . "Oh, of course! I had a duplicate necklace made, but it never occurred to me that anyone would find it."

"So! He *was* a successful blackmailer after all. That's more link for Scotland Yard, if they find it."

Helen sighed. "What a muddle we've made of life! Selfishness has much to answer for. . . ."

"I think Aubrey's sorry for it now."

"Oh, I don't blame him entirely . . . we both . . . But what's the good of talking about it? It's over now . . . our home life was a farce, and all I want to do is to forget . . . it . . . and him."

Barbara arranged the pillows and kissed her.

"Try to get some sleep," she said.

Helen was fast asleep when Kate came in at nine o'clock. She carried in her arms a bunch of shaggy, pale yellow chrysanthemums which she arranged in a tall Indian vase on the dressing-table. After a moment's hesitation she placed a card on the small table beside the bed and tiptoed out of the room.

CHAPTER XXV

INSPECTOR ROSE SEES POSSIBILITIES

Two men sat facing one another over a plain deal table; one was stout and jolly, the other thin and peevish. On shelves around the room were heavy ledgers and bulging files. It was a severely plain room. Inspector Bucket looked at the genial face of his companion and shook his head.

"What's the good?" he said.

Inspector Rose scratched his head doubtfully and then gazed at his finger. "Good?" he repeated. "Good? But we've got to do something."

"Start a wild goose chase because a damned chit of a girl invented a clever defence."

"But the Professor's evidence?"

"There are liars, damned liars and expert witnesses—you've heard that before and probably proved it. Well, Professor Gerstein's an expert witness, and he got away with it. I'd sooner believe Sir Chorley, but there was something wrong with him that day. The bruise, I suppose—one can't afford to miss things in a murder trial. As for those other cases . . . pure assumption . . . not a shred of evidence. Bah! a jury like that will believe anything when there's a pretty woman in the dock."

The stout man shook his head. "'Let me have men about me that are fat; sleek-headed men, and such as sleep o' nights.' I always said, Bob, that you ought to have married some nice plump lass. She'd 'ave taught you a

proper respect for her charming sex. As it is, you're a woman-hater an' it warps your judgment."

"She might teach me some things, but never to like a female sawbones."

"Sawbones be blowed! She's a nice plump lass if ever I saw one. What she wants is a fine upstanding husband to keep her in order. But she's a clever 'un too, and for two pins she'd have a shot at this job herself."

The other scowled. "She'd better not try!"

"Oh, that's all right. I warned her off; we don't want the bird scared."

"Bird!" retorted the other. "Bird! Then you do think there was somebody else?"

"Yes. There's that Chinaman. But, of course, you haven't heard about him yet. On the night of the exhumation of the body of Paul Marks, Gerstein's daughter—a poor crippled kid—says she saw a Chinaman looking in at the sitting-room window. Then he went round to the back door and made some inquiries with regard to the movements of the Professor. Such a circumstance, occurring at such a time, is in itself suspicious, and Miss Elder, who heard of it, reported the matter to me."

"To bolster up their case! Did you verify?"

"Yes. I saw both the daughter and the servant. It wasn't to bolster evidence either, for she didn't tell me until the case was over."

"Well, I don't see anything in it. Nothing happened to the Professor."

"You haven't heard the whole story yet. About three days later a Chink was run over by a bus, about half a mile from the Professor's house. He was badly injured—compound fracture of the right thigh bone—and he is still in hospital. Amongst the things found on him were a large clasp knife and a slip of paper on which was written—or rather printed by hand—Gerstein's address. Somebody was mighty anxious to prevent the Professor giving evidence—it might have been either the Defence, the Prosecution, or the real criminal. It obviously was not the Defence; we

know it wasn't the Prosecution; it must have been the man who killed Paul Marks—the snake poison expert. Now I maintain that in view of these facts we must pay attention to the theories of the learned Professor with regard to those other cases. We can imagine circumstances which will fit in with his views—some controlling genius who disposes of his tools when they have done their work. Do you recollect that in every case the men had apparently got rid of their spoil, that there was very little to show for their past activities?"

"And the Chink, when he gets out of hospital, is to act as a decoy?"

"Yes, I shall be warned. And I've got a couple of smart men on the job."

"And if that fails?"

Inspector Rose looked at his watch.

"Professor Gerstein will be here in a few minutes. I want to have some more details about this concentrated venom. That will take us to the other end of the trail. It will be much easier if we can bring it off this end and save a great deal of trouble."

"Can't you pick it up anywhere in the middle?"

The other shook his head. "We're up against an exceptional man," he said. "This is his fourth attempt, to our knowledge, and, if it hadn't been for your female sawbones, he'd have got away with this one too and a woman hanged into the bargain. I'm not sure I shan't have a chat with Dr. Barbara Elder if things don't go well."

Professor Gerstein was ushered in before Inspector Bucket had time to say what he thought. He was escorted by a large policeman and was evidently apprehensive of their intentions. Rose produced a seat and relieved him of his hat, whilst Bucket regarded him with veiled hostility—they were going to have a lot more trouble because of this insignificant little man.

The burly Inspector was the first to speak. "We must thank you for coming this afternoon, Professor—a busy

man is not always so willing to sacrifice his own convenience in the interests of justice."

Gerstein gave a nervous cough. He still wondered what was coming—a sort of grim foreboding that they were going to warn him that anything he might say would be taken down in writing, and might be used as evidence against him.

"Er . . . yes . . ." he volunteered. "You see, I didn't want Anitra to be frightened . . . and policemen are not in the habit of paying us visits. I thought it would save trouble to come here—the neighbours are so inclined to talk."

The Inspector smothered a smile. "I shouldn't have come in uniform, Professor."

"Oh," he said, looking round the cheerless room and finally fixing on Inspector Bucket. "Oh . . . then perhaps it's a pity. Anitra would have given you some tea."

He was still looking at Inspector Bucket, who furtively restored the toothpick, which he had been using assiduously, to his waistcoat pocket.

"I wanted to ask you, Professor, about that statement you made in Court with regard to concentrated venom. If I understood you rightly, you suspected a certain variety of snake poison because it had been produced, or manufactured, in a concentrated form—you must correct me if I'm wrong. The venom found in the body of Paul Marks, more especially in the palm of the right hand, was far more powerful than any known snake poison. Is that correct?"

The little man beamed on this very apt pupil. He took a piece of chalk from his pocket and covered the table with figures running to five places of decimals.

"Here," he said, "is the fatal dose of cobra venom, here of Russell's viper; here of the Australian death adder, as you see, a very deadly snake; here is the fatal dose of the tiger-snake; here of the rattlesnake—*Crotalus horridus*. Now we come to the venom extracted from the tissues of the deceased. I was fortunate in obtaining a very pure extract from the hand—here we have the toxicity of this sample

and, as you see, it is many times more potent than any I have yet demonstrated. As far as I know, the only concentrated extract ever produced was from the poison of *Lachesis lanceolatus*—the fer-de-lance. The work was carried out by an assistant in the laboratories at Quita who suddenly disappeared, taking all his notes and samples with him. It's a curious story, and I fear, gentlemen, that is all I can tell you about it."

Inspector Rose rubbed his fat hands together. "Ah," he said, "disappeared, taking all his notes and samples with him—a description of this gentleman might be of great interest to the police."

But no further evidence could be obtained from the learned professor. They asked him for his opinion of Sir Chorley Bartle's evidence, but obtained little satisfaction—beyond the fact that, obviously, Professor Gerstein did not consider the pathologist a safe person to hold the scales of justice in a police court. He muttered something about the danger of a great reputation and a dogmatic temperament and unduly swaying the jury.

"How long ago was this work done in South America?"

"About twenty years."

"One more question, Professor. Did you hear anything of an accident in the High Street, near your house, the day you gave your demonstration at Dartford?"

The scientist looked scared. "Dear me," he said . . . "an accident . . . yes . . . the man was just behind me when he was run over. Poor fellow! The police are very efficient, as I said to Anitra."

"Well!" said Rose, after his visitor had gone, "what about it? Our friend, the professor, had a fairly narrow escape. Even the modern traffic conditions may become an instrument in the hands of Providence."

Inspector Bucket reluctantly agreed that there might be grounds for further investigation.

There was a knock at the door and the large policeman looked in again.

"There's a boy . . . says 'e 'as an appointment to see

you, sir." Inspector Rose looked puzzled. "Boy?" he repeated.

"Yes, sir, sort of Barnum's freak."

"Oh, yes, I remember—show him in."

The heavy tread of the policeman died away down the passage.

"This boy is a friend of the Chinaman; he visits him in hospital and brings him things. A policeman saw him pick up a lady's bag in the street, and told him that if he came here he would get half a crown's reward. The bag wasn't worth much. I dropped it."

Bucket gazed at his colleague with respect. "You're a deep 'un, Bert, for all your fat."

And Rufus Jackett was ushered into the room.

As the policeman had indicated, he was a strange object—his head was too large, his legs were too short, his arms were too long and his eyes were too prominent. He stood blinking in the doorway and the policeman gave him a push. Like a terrier he turned on the man:

"Garn," he snarled, "yer leave me alone, I ain't a bloomin' crook. 'Onest, oi be, an' oi want five bob fer bein' 'onest."

"Half a crown, Rufus!" corrected Inspector Rose reproachfully. "That's what the kind gentleman in blue said."

He pushed forward the chair and signed to the policeman to go. "So you found a bag in the street?"

"Yus, a one with sham crockerdoile skin—crockerdoiles is reptiles."

"Yes," said the Inspector, feeling his way with care. "Years ago when I was in Africa I saw a man who had been bitten by a crocodile; it had broken his leg in two places."

"Blimey!" exclaimed the urchin.

"But they got well very quickly. Two or three weeks."

"Blimey—seems quick!"

"Nonsense," said the Inspector. "Broken legs generally get well quickly."

The urchin gazed at him suspiciously. "'Ere—gie us the chink, I dunno nuthink about broken legs."

The Inspector produced a half-crown and gave it to him.

"Here you are," he said.

As the door closed on their small visitor, for the first time that afternoon Inspector Bucket chuckled,

"Two can play at some games," he observed.

"Yes. I didn't want him to frighten our yellow friend, so I thought it best to stop there. But I shall know Mr. Rufus Jackett if I ever see him again. London may be a big place, but you could scarcely lose a boy like that in it."

"I'd sooner have that boy working for me than any damned female sawbones," said Inspector Bucket. "He's a smart lad."

CHAPTER XXVI

THE SUPERFLUITY OF BARBARA

THE position at the Vicarage was difficult and Kate was too honest to prevaricate, even for Barbara's sake.

"I expect it would be better if I went, mum?" There was a pathetic note of interrogation in the girl's voice, but her mother did not attempt to dissuade her. Life with George was becoming increasingly difficult and Barbara did not exactly sprinkle oil on the troubled waters of George Elder's ambitions. He had confidently expected to be made a Canon when Stokes died, and instead the preferment had been given to the Rev. James Riley—a man for whom he had the most supreme contempt. Barbara had discovered the appointment in an evening paper and announced it to the family at dinner when they had visitors. Her father had resented it, for obviously he could not express his feelings in such circumstances, and he had a good deal he wanted to say about it. That was like Barbara. It was the sort of thing she was always doing, and he felt sure that it was deliberate.

Kate knew quite well that he was afraid of his daughter, and there was no need for her to live at home now that she was qualified. It had been convenient whilst she was on the out-patient staff at the Hospital, but her appointments

were nearly finished now, and she could quite well look after herself.

"I shall miss you, dear," said Kate.

"But it will make things easier for you at home. Won't it, mum?"

"Perhaps. In any case you will be going into practice or taking a 'locum' soon."

"What about Helen?"

"Perhaps you could take some rooms together. I think Aubrey is genuinely anxious to get her back again, but she is not very responsive just yet."

Barbara laughed. "It's like a second courtship—flowers and messages. He's not altogether a fool. I believe he is beginning to wear down her resistance. The trouble is that he thought she had done it; with a woman of Helen's temperament, that will take some getting over."

"Well, think it over carefully, dear, but don't say anything to-night. Henry Judson and Admiral Fustian-Hall are coming to dinner, and your father always enjoys these little gatherings."

"All right, mum," said Barbara with unaccustomed docility.

It is possible that she realized that her father was not entirely to blame—she had always been a rebel, and rebellion is not conducive to domestic harmony. She even wondered whether Peter might be a little afraid of her as a household asset.

So it was a chastened Barbara who sat next to Henry Judson at dinner; and the philanthropist, mindful of many snubs in the past, felt that at last he was reaping the reward of his patient toleration. And Barbara, for the first time, appreciated the range of his knowledge on all subjects—he had travelled widely and his information about people was encyclopædic.

"Do you know Debrett by heart?" she asked.

She did not hear his answer for the genial voice of Admiral Fustian-Hall broke in on their conversation.

"You can't. Can you, Dr. Barbara?"

"Can't what?" she asked.

"Can't tell if a person's jaundiced by gas light. My liver's been very off-colour lately and Mrs. Elder says that I look very well. I say that she can't possibly tell except by daylight."

"You are quite right, but what a melancholy subject for the dinner-table!"

"Not at all, not at all. What the dev . . . dickens . . . would the average retired Indian Colonel do if he hadn't a liver—it's the very basis of his whole existence, and the solace of his declining years. There was a colonel once who challenged his doctor to a duel because he said that there was nothing wrong with his liver. They fought, too, and the doctor put a bullet into the organ just to satisfy him."

"You don't propose to send your seconds to my wife, Admiral, I hope," said the Rev. George.

The gallant old sea-dog looked at Kate.

"No, sir, I have long been vanquished; the darts of the little winged god have pierced my susceptible heart and I am for ever her most humble slave."

Barbara looked at Henry Judson. "And you, Mr. Judson, have you no tribute to lay at the feet of my incomparable mother?"

"The senior service has too long specialized in such arts for any man to challenge its supremacy; but in this case the Admiral is merely the spokesman of all who know Mrs. Elder."

"And there are no crumbs from her table for me to eat?"

"Time alone will show, Miss Barbara, whether you are worthy even of the crumbs," said the Admiral—and he said it as though he meant it.

The girl flushed, for she knew that he had expressed the doubts of age and experience with regard to modern youth. If it had been Henry Judson she would not have minded, but the Admiral liked her and she had always appreciated his affection. Behind his badinage there was a gentle reproof.

"How is Mrs. Heylet?" said Henry Judson. "I have

taken the liberty of bringing her some grapes. It must have been a terrible ordeal for anyone as highly-strung as she is, and even worse for her husband."

"She is much better now."

"And she owed her defence to your intuition?"

"Hardly that, but I happened to know her rather well, and, knowing her, it was inconceivable that she could have committed the crime with which she was charged. The rest was comparatively simple once I had aroused Professor Gerstein's interest."

After Kate and Barbara had gone, the men sat talking for some time over their coffee and cigars.

"I know Gerstein very well indeed," said the Admiral. "He's a quaint old stick and there's a good deal of mystery about his past—nobody seems to know where he came from . . . started as a lab. assistant. But he's absolutely straight, and a genius in his own special line."

"Then you believed his snake-venom theory?"

"Rather more than a theory, Judson—it was good enough for the jury, and Bloxham agreed with the verdict."

Judson laughed. "I'm not an expert in such matters," he said, "but to me it seemed rather a fantastic idea—more especially as it went against the weight of Sir Chorley Bartle's great experience."

"Sir Chorley Bartle!" the Admiral snorted. "A man like that is a constant danger to the cause of justice. The very fact that he has been knighted makes a jury inclined to accept his evidence over the heads of far greater authorities, who spend their whole time at pathological work and seldom come into the limelight. If we grant that he has had a great experience of criminal work, that doesn't compensate for the fact that he has not sufficient general knowledge to balance his judgment."

"Well, I agree with Judson," said the vicar. "To me the evidence for the defence seemed extraordinary . . . most extraordinary."

"Not quite as extraordinary as you think, vicar," the

Admiral interposed. "Snake venom has been used in crime for hundreds of years. It has even been employed as an arrow poison—indeed in the arrow poisons we can find quite a lot of intelligent anticipation of recent developments in medicine and criminology. The post-mortem wound was anticipated in the use of putrid flesh to cause blood-poisoning; earth, contaminated, with the tetanus bacillus, was used to cause lockjaw; the astute criminal, postulated by the Defence in the recent trial, had his prototype in the savage who used snake and toad venom for his arrow heads; whilst, of course, the use of curare, antiarin, aconitin, and other vegetable poisons has been enormously practised."

"Surely not toad venom, Admiral!" exclaimed the vicar.

"Yes, he's right there," Henry Judson agreed; "in the Atrato valley in Colombia they slowly roast live toads over the fire and collect the venom as it exudes."

"Then you know South America, Judson?"

"Only from books. I have always been interested in books of travel. I read that somewhere and it stuck."

The vicar knocked the ash off his cigar. "Shall we join the ladies?" he said. "They don't mind smoking."

Helen Heylet read over a second time the letter in her hand. Then she gazed reflectively at a riot of pink carnations which adorned the mantelpiece and overflowed on to the writing-table . . . "Entirely my fault . . . a mistake for which I pray the future may enable me to make amends . . . my dear wife . . ."

It was scarcely conceivable that the selfish, idle man she had known could have written such words. But, he had taken for granted, with lazy toleration, that she had done it . . . urged her to plead guilty of a momentary impulse . . . justification! Why, on the other hand, should he think anything else? He had never known her . . . they had never known each other—mere acquaintances.

She blushed as she remembered her early attempts to infuse some fire into his lukewarm affection—the time when

she first realized that her beauty was powerless before his egotism and sloth. Why had he married her? Because he wanted a presentable housekeeper! A few spasmodic flashes, during the first weeks of their married life, and then the thick darkness of indifference. How she had hated him—she, who with a flash of the eyes, a smile, a gesture, could draw men to her feet. And now the devil was sick, and the devil a saint would be! She threw the letter into the fire.

But she knew that something would have to be done about it soon. In spite of Barbara's casual denials and Kate's gentle assurances she knew that the master of the house did not welcome her. If he was not actively hostile, he was a passive objector—it had been obvious in his relief when she said that she did not feel fit to join them at dinner that evening. It was the Reverend George Elder who gave her the feeling that at all costs the murderer must be found, for she knew that he could not be alone in his opinion of the verdict. Her faith was in Barbara; but the police had put a stop to her investigations.

The following morning she was sipping her early cup of tea when Barbara came into the room. She sat down on the edge of the bed, with a blue slipper dangling precariously from a shapely foot, and lit a cigarette.

"Pyjamas are very convenient," she remarked. "They give one a freedom which is never conceded by a mere nightie. Of course, they are far more decent too, but Pater still views them with suspicion and dear little mum has her doubts on the subject."

Helen knew the signs of the time. When Barbara talked like that she had something important to say, and didn't want to say it.

"You came in to talk to me," she said. "But it wasn't about pyjamas; for you know quite well that I don't wear them and they don't interest me. What's the trouble?"

"I've got to turn out . . . my own fault. I'm getting on Pater's nerves."

"We might take some rooms together," Helen suggested.

"I thought you would say that. But what about the ardent suitor?" And she looked at the flowers on the mantelpiece.

"His suit doesn't prosper. I'd like to be with you for a bit, Babs."

"But I'm at the Hospital all day."

"Never mind. I'll do the house work, I'm sure I should make an excellent charlady. How long does your Hospital appointment last?"

"Three months."

"And then?"

"A 'locum' or two whilst I look round. The idea of general practice doesn't appeal to me very much, but it'll probably come to that in the end."

"But there's Peter!"

"I don't believe in marriage as a refuge for the destitute."

"Then you understand what I feel about Aubrey."

She looked at her attractive companion.

"But I think I can appreciate Peter's point of view," she continued. "He's essentially a *man*—the other sort is quite impossible . . . I've tried one."

Barbara got up and stretched her long form.

"Very well," she said, "then it's a bargain."

But it was not to be quite as easy as Helen imagined. After lunch Kate said:

"Aubrey is coming to tea." Before Helen could protest, she went on: "I know, dear, that you hate the idea—and perhaps it is natural; but Aubrey is very penitent and he begged for an opportunity to speak to you . . . I want you to do it for my sake."

It was an unanswerable plea, for Helen owed a great deal to Kate. But it would be like tearing the scab from a newly-healed wound. Helen could hear his supercilious, insincere excuses; she could see his lazy self-confidence accepting her submission as a right; she could feel his lukewarm kisses bestowed with regal condescension—it had all happened before again and again. It had even deceived her when they were first married, when she—inexperienced

little fool—had craved for some active demonstration of real affection. He had been spoiled and petted, wrapped in cotton-wool, flattered by adoring parents and servile underlings, until he had become a mere domestic parasite, sucking the life blood from those around him and giving nothing in return. The spoiled child of fortune could never make an adequate husband.

And now it was to begin all over again! for in Kate's gentle judgment she read her sentence of lifelong servitude. Kate thought—everybody would think—that she ought to return to him, and she knew that now she had not the strength to resist the force of public opinion.

And Kate had arranged for her to see him alone!

"Mr. Heylet, 'm."

Helen stood entrenched behind the small table laden with the familiar and comforting appurtenances of afternoon tea. The brass kettle was singing gently over the spirit lamp. As Aubrey Heylet gazed at the hostile, white, drawn face of his wife he realized, as never before, the tragedy for which he was responsible.

"Helen," he said.

The reproach in her eyes broke through his self-control and overwhelmed him in a flood of self-recrimination. He threw himself down on the couch, buried his head in his hands and sobbed with noisy, spasmodic helplessness.

For a moment she regarded him in amazement. She had been prepared for almost anything else, but not for this. Here was an entirely new phenomenon—a helpless man, distracted, abandoned to the hell-hounds of a futile remorse.

"Don't, Aubrey," she said. "Don't! It hurts."

She crossed the room swiftly and put a hand on his shoulder. "Don't," she repeated. And she noticed that the hair over his temples was turning grey.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE TRAIL OF THE CHINAMAN

A CHINAMAN limped painfully down the slope which led from the main entrance of St. Chad's Hospital to the street. He was using crutches.

With the help of a kindly stranger he boarded an omnibus going East. He did not notice an insignificant little man in a grey lounge suit and tweed cap, who also joined the vehicle at the Hospital. Indeed, why should he? There was nothing conspicuous about Mr. Alfred Jones, he was most deliberately commonplace. And Mr. Alfred Jones took not the slightest notice of the Chinaman—he buried his head in the voluminous folds of his newspaper. But he heard the man ask for Aldred Road, Poplar, and he asked for a fourpenny ticket which happened to be of the same value as that tendered to the lame man.

The Chinaman collected his crutches, but Mr. Alfred Jones left the bus almost before it had pulled up at Aldred Road. He sauntered down the pavement to a tobacconist's shop and studied the contents of the window. He was feeling annoyed with the chief, for anyone could have followed a Chink on crutches—and he had always been given the more difficult work . . . it was like using a razor to sharpen a pencil.

He glanced down the road. His quarry had been set down and was hobbling away up the street in the opposite direction. Mr. Jones crossed the road and sauntered after him. The man turned into a maze of disreputable streets leading towards the river. Alfred Jones took a scarf out of his pocket, wound it round his meagre throat and pulled his cap down over his eyes—it was more a concession to the neighbourhood than anything else, for he was quite sure the Chinaman had not seen him. And the further he went the more simple did his task seem to be—crowded streets

with stalls and costers' barrows; Jews, Turks, infidels and heretics jostling one another in busy confusion . . . the cries of street hawkers and the yapping of hungry curs. But through it all the lame man passed, looking neither to the right nor to the left.

Soon the crowded thoroughfares were left behind; through narrow streets they passed to one which led to the riverside. Here and there a ragged child was playing on a neglected doorstep, or a slatternly woman standing in the doorway, with arms akimbo, gossiped with a neighbour. A bootlace of Mr. Alfred Jones had come down and was dragging forlornly in his wake. The Chinaman stopped. Mr. Jones slipped into a doorway to do up his bootlace. What was the matter with the man? He had stopped in the middle of the road, and was gazing with a puzzled air at the house in front of him; he looked up at the windows; he hobbled to the door and tugged at the handle. For two minutes he stood there irresolutely, then he turned and limped back again the way he had come. There was a knotted piece of string protruding from a hole in the door against which Mr. Jones was leaning. He pulled the string and slipped inside.

As the halting step died away, he emerged and hurried down the street to where the Chinaman had stood. In front of him was a squalid house with the upper windows obscured by dust and festooned with cobwebs; over the lower windows boards had been roughly fastened; in the fanlight over the door was a notice stating that the house was "to let". Mr. Alfred Jones turned and hurried after the Chinaman—he was apparently making for the bus route again. In the market he picked out the quaint figure once again threading its way wearily through the cosmopolitan crowd. This time he boarded a bus going west; and Mr. Jones clambered up to the top and took a seat which commanded the pavement.

From the Bank they travelled by tube to Tottenham Court Road. Here the man changed on to the Highgate line, and Mr. Jones followed at his leisure. A train clattered

noisily into the station, the automatic doors slid open and the weary Chinaman entered. Mr. Jones availed himself of another door, appropriated an end seat, and once more was absorbed in his newspaper. He glanced over the top of his paper . . . the Chinaman had just entered and the doors were closing. With a sudden, sinuous movement the Oriental wriggled through the narrowing gap, and the doors closed with a click of finality. As the train gathered speed Mr. Jones had a fleeting glimpse of a yellow mask-like face with protruding teeth and narrow, slanting eyes which mocked his ineptitude.

"I wonder if the East End excursion was a fake," said Inspector Rose in a tone which did not flatter his companion. Mr. Alfred Jones stared forlornly into his hat. The whole thing had turned out a perfect fiasco. From the moment when he slipped from the train at the Tottenham Court Road station the Chinaman had completely vanished. All the police in London had been notified to keep a lookout for a Chinaman on crutches. Twenty-four hours had been wasted, waiting for news—it would be so easy to pick up a Chinaman on crutches; he could not cross a road without being seen by a policeman. And then Rose heard from the Goodge Street Police Station that a pair of crutches had been found in the area of an unoccupied house in a small street off the Tottenham Court Road. Inquiries at St. Chad's Hospital revealed the fact that they belonged to a Chinaman who had been discharged from the Hospital early the previous day. For some time he had been walking with perfect ease using a stick; but, at his own request, had been discharged on crutches as he professed lack of confidence to face the crowded streets.

Inspector Rose rubbed it in.

"Anyhow we shan't get him now; you've scared him properly. Everything depends upon whether he spotted you before he went to that street. If he didn't it might be worth while having a look at that 'House To Let'."

"I'm sure there was no pretence about that," ventured

Mr. Jones with humility. "He was certainly taken by surprise when he saw the house was empty. He must have spotted me on the way back, but goodness only knows how he did it."

"Ump! Then we'll have a look at the house to-night. I've been in touch with the agents. The last tenant had been in occupation for two or three years; he paid his rent regularly in cash, and professed to own the original name of Herbert Smith. They know nothing whatever about him—nobody knows anything about anyone else in that street . . . any undue curiosity is apt to be unhealthy down there. Meet me here at about 9.30, the street is fairly deserted just before the pubs close, and I have the key."

At ten o'clock that night the two detectives were standing outside the empty house.

"Lucky those windows are boarded," whispered the burley Inspector. "It will simplify our work on the ground floor, but you'll have to be careful with the lantern when you get upstairs."

He slipped the key into the lock and turned it cautiously.

To Alfred Jones, who, in spite of his leech-like propensities, was not a born detective, the empty rooms conveyed no information. He watched with interest his massive companion crawling about on the floor, peering up chimneys, tapping the wainscot, and examining empty cupboards.

"Yes," said the Inspector, as he mopped his forehead with a large and passionate handkerchief, "it certainly is an interesting house—two rooms never used; the back kitchen occupied by a small man with peculiar habits; the stairs and passages covered by a thick carpet of excellent quality."

Alfred Jones looked helplessly at his companion.

"But there's no carpet, and no sign of a carpet," he objected.

"Of course there isn't, you fool!" said his chief. "But there has been. Look at the boards, look at that nail. It will be interesting to see where that carpet leads to."

"Ah," he exclaimed, when they had reached the landing, "here we have quite a different state of affairs."

He threw open a heavy door which seemed strangely out of keeping with the rest of the house. The powerful light from his lantern flashed around the room, avoiding the windows. "Panelling," he muttered, "cheap, but still panelling. Carpet here, too." He went down on his hands and knees in the middle of the room. "And a heavy desk, just here! The centre of our spider's web, but the spider has gone.

"Hallo! What's this?"

He went to the corner of the room and stooped down. It was a small piece of newspaper wrapped into a ball. He carefully unfolded it and some crumbs fell on to the floor at his feet. He examined the paper.

"Ah," he whispered, "so someone is coming here still. Millwall versus West Ham—that match was played yesterday afternoon—yesterday's *Evening News*!"

He tapped along the partition wall. Then he inserted a small crowbar into a crack and levered. A concealed door sprang open revealing a small room with a skylight and no fireplace.

"Very convenient!" said Inspector Rose. And he continued his investigations.

Suddenly he stood still and placed a warning hand on his companion's arm. "Sh!" he whispered.

There was a faint snap, a scuffling noise in the small back room downstairs and then the sound of cautious footsteps ascending the stairs.

The Inspector drew his companion through the concealed doorway and pulled it to, leaving a small crack. There was the sound of a door cautiously opened and a dark, indistinct figure crept into the room. The watchers could see the pencil of light from an electric torch darting to and fro in the room. Then it settled on a section of panelling near the fireplace, and stealthily the crouching figure advanced along the line of light. His back was towards the watchers and they could not see what he was doing, but for five minutes

he worked. Suddenly there was a metallic clang and the dark shadow staggered backwards a couple of paces.

"Hands up!" said Inspector Rose.

Instinctively the man raised his hands, and there was a click as the handcuffs closed on his wrists.

"I ain't doin' nothink, guv'ner," said a strident voice. "Nothink wrong," it added as an afterthought.

The Inspector tweaked off the cap and revealed the squat features and protuberant eyes of Mr. Rufus Jackett.

"You'll just come along with me, m' lad. And you won't get half a crown this time."

But Rufus Jackett was not communicative and he was not responsive to the wiles of Inspector Rose, who sighed for the good old days of the thumb-screw and rack. He obstinately refused to reveal the object of his nocturnal operations; he protested that he had no previous knowledge of the safe in the wall; and he stated that, apart from the fact that he had met the man in the Hospital, he knew nothing whatever about the Chinaman. He maintained that he had stolen nothing, and an examination of his pockets proved that, in this respect, he was telling the truth. He could, of course, be charged with being a suspected person on enclosed premises, but the nature of the premises made such a charge difficult to sustain.

Finally the Inspector decided to let him go in the hope that eventually he would lead them to some more important quarry. And Rufus Jackett whistled an ear-splitting melody as he departed from the police station. But Inspector Rose sighed, for he realized that this would mean a visit to America—that for three months he would be separated from the kindly matron who, in his estimation, had never ceased to be the nice plump lass he had married twenty-five years ago.

CHAPTER XXVIII

WESTWARD HO!

"THAT's checkmate," said Anitra.

Inspector Rose rubbed his scalp just above the right ear.

"You play a tidy game," he conceded, "for a little 'un."

"I'm twenty-one," Anitra protested indignantly. "You neglect your pawns, and pawns are very important things in . . . chess. A pawn can checkmate a king if it's properly handled."

"Ah!" said the Inspector. And, to his annoyance, he thought of Barbara Elder.

He got up restlessly from his chair.

"I can't wait much longer. Will he be back soon?"

The game had lasted three-quarters of an hour, and he had fondly imagined that he would polish her off in ten minutes. He was annoyed, for he was a prominent member of the South Ham chess club.

He had called to see the Professor and found Anitra engaged in chess problems. The Professor would be back soon. Hence a game of chess which was not without its bearing upon the future of both Inspector Rose and Dr. Barbara Elder.

Anitra glanced at the clock.

"He can't be long now."

Fate had not been treating Inspector Rose kindly. The Chinaman had entirely disappeared; several halt and maimed Orientals had been produced by vigilant policemen, but none of them resembled in the slightest degree the man he wanted to interview. The house of mystery yielded no further clues and Mr. Rufus Jackett was leading a blameless life as hall-porter to a social club in the East End.

The Authorities, after some deliberation, had decided

that a visit to South America might be useful. It was a long journey, but any fresh clues would have to be followed up on the spot, and the information required from the Snake Park could only be obtained by a personal interview. Inspector Rose was instructed to sail for America by the next boat.

Chess was not, therefore, the object of his present visit; he wanted an introduction from Professor Gerstein to the director of the Instituto Quita.

When he returned home, after an hour's interview with the Professor, he was primed with much information concerning the production of snake venom, and had in his pocket a letter of introduction to Dr. Henrique Garros, the aged Director of the Institute.

The voyage to South America was not altogether a pleasure trip for Inspector Rose. He was a bad sailor, and they experienced very dirty weather at first; he was a hearty eater, and the second-class promenade deck could not compensate for the generous hospitality of the second-class dining-saloon. It was, therefore, with a feeling of profound relief that he contemplated the coast-line of South America.

They approached Rio in the noontide splendour of a cloudless day, with a blue veil of mist on the distant hills, and the great twin sentinels to guide them to safe harbourage. And the riots of blues and greens took shape and substance—emerald isles on a lake of azure, black forests of masts and funnels, human habitations, crouching in picturesque confusion beneath the ordered prosperity of the palm-clad hillside.

The journey from Rio to Quita was a test of physical and moral endurance. Once a week a small steamer passed between the two places—a steamer constructed on strictly utilitarian principles, with small consideration for the comfort of its passengers. The journey occupied four days, and the steamer showed a tendency to hug the shore, and put in to small harbours and pestilential creeks whenever there was an opportunity of renewing its stock of mosquitoes.

Nets were provided for the passengers; but in such a state of disrepair that they formed veritable mosquito traps. And these insects loved Inspector Rose—his round, juicy form was specially constructed to satisfy the blood-lust of the voracious female anopheline. They "pinged" around his head and kept him awake, they bit him whenever and wherever opportunity offered, and, where they bit, large irritable swellings recorded the fact with unerring accuracy. And the worthy Inspector swore, and perspired; he longed for Ellen and wished himself home again.

At Quita he was dogged by bad luck. On the day after his arrival he was informed that Dr. Garros was away—he had gone south to visit a friend, and would not return for ten days or a fortnight. So for ten days the Inspector perspired and fumed and wandered forlornly about the narrow streets of the derelict town, which seemed to have concentrated into its limited compass all the odours of organic decomposition. It was, therefore, no great surprise to him that on the tenth day he felt far from well. He shivered, pains ran through his limbs, and his temperature climbed to the limit of human endurance. The hotel proprietor, who boasted a slight knowledge of the English language, suggested a doctor and volunteered to supply a competent one. And the patient lay in bed in extreme discomfort, with a splitting headache, a deathly nausea and a thirst unquenchable—praying for a speedy response to the proprietor's message.

The doctor was a Portuguese. Inspector Rose is never likely to forget him. He was a small, round, jovial man with fierce moustachios and an eternal smile. He could not speak a word of English, but made it abundantly evident that he regarded an attack of malaria as one of the humorous trivialities of life. He smiled at the invalid, patted him on the head, felt his pulse, looked at his tongue, took his temperature and whistled a tune. Then, suddenly, he produced a murderous—at least, so it seemed to the fevered mind of the prostrate Inspector—a murderous syringe, which he proceeded to boil in a small receptacle evidently

constructed for the purpose. He filled the implement with a fluid which he extracted from a glass phial. Then he advanced on Inspector Rose with the syringe in his hand and a smile on his swarthy countenance.

The patient realized that he was to receive his quinine by injection; and the needle looked formidable. Moreover, he seemed to have heard somewhere that quinine could quite well be taken by the mouth. He opened his lips and pointed down his throat. The doctor smiled and nodded, but he continued to advance on his helpless patient. He pulled down the bed-clothes, rolled the bulky Inspector over on his face, and deliberately stabbed him in a part of his anatomy which the victim had always regarded as especially constructed for juvenile correction. For the honour of the police force the patient kept quiet, but he nearly yelled, for the action had been both painful and unexpected. His executioner collected his tools, grasped the patient's hand affectionately, patted him reassuringly on the chest, and expressed his intention of repeating the performance on the following day—fortunately his meaning was not grasped by the long-suffering man.

On the following day Inspector Rose felt much better. He had passed a miserable night, but his sufferings had been mitigated by the kindly attentions of a black-eyed wench who had cheerfully undertaken to nurse him. She was a fine, strapping girl of his own special brand, and was not hampered in her very practical ministrations by any bashful timidity.

As the attack subsided he lay bathed in perspiration, parched with thirst, and—to use his own expression—weak as a rat. The stars disappeared and a square patch of increasing brightness betokened the birth of another day—but how slowly it altered! The door opened softly and the girl peeped in. He moved restlessly—for Inspector Rose was not without subtlety—and she came to his side. Her dark hair was hanging in a thick shining coil down her back over a loose wrap of some pink material, which was open at the front. Her night attire was nicely adjusted to the

temperature conditions, and did her no injustice. She stooped over the prostrate man and placed a cool hand on his moist brow. Then she fetched the needful appliances and sponged him all over with the skill and thoroughness of a trained nurse. His sodden pyjamas she replaced with an antiquated cotton nightgown. With a sigh of relief Inspector Rose turned on his side and went to sleep.

In the morning he greeted his kindly nurse with a smile of gratitude which was not unmixed with a pleasant anticipation of something to eat, for he was feeling distinctly better. But the laxity indicated by her night attire was not reflected in her conduct: she had taken her orders from the round, bouncing, smiling autocrat with the syringe—and milk and water was the best she could do.

The doctor paid an early visit; he smiled at Lucia, patted the patient, rolled him over and punctured him again—this time on the other side. And the girl contemplated the operation with an unfaltering professional eye. Inspector Rose realized that English standards were not of world-wide application. To his relief no further injections were required, but he was informed, through his landlord, that he would have to swallow quinine for at least eight weeks. And the irate Inspector went into his bedroom, which had a nice white wall, and squashed six mosquitoes. Then he went out for a walk with the fair Lucia, who occupied a privileged position as niece to the hotel proprietor.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE SNAKE PARK

Two days later Inspector Rose received a letter saying that Dr. Henrique Garros had returned to Quita and would be pleased to see him. He hired a derelict trap, with a broken-winded horse, presided over by an ancient who must surely have been the oldest inhabitant. The drive to the Institute took about half an hour, for it was at least two miles outside

the town. It was a beautiful drive, the day was hot, the road uneven, and the stout man did not grudge the money. At the entrance to the Park he got rid of his Jehu after a heated argument in which neither spoke a word. It was conducted on obvious lines—Jehu held up six fingers, the Inspector held up three, Jehu compromised with four, and his fare clinched the bargain. To the turn of the road the aged patriarch could be heard expressing his views on things in general and Inspector Rose in particular.

A group of people stood on a patch of rough grass in front of the low white building. In the centre was a stately old gentleman with a neatly trimmed, white beard, whom the visitor rightly concluded to be Dr. Garros. The doctor greeted him with elaborate courtesy and explained the situation. A snake-charmer, who professed to have discovered a certain cure for snake-bite, had come to the Institute that morning and offered to demonstrate his method. His appeal to the staff of the Institute for volunteers had been treated with derision, and he now expressed his willingness to allow any snake they might select to bite him, in order that he might prove the value of his discovery.

To the official mind the performance seemed to be an illegal one. Whether, however, it came under the gaming laws, dangerous drugs act, or the by-laws of the local authority, he could not decide. The dignified Director, who spoke English fluently, agreed that the experiment might terminate fatally—in which case there would be one rogue less in the world. Men of this type were a danger in the neighbourhood, for they discredited his serum work.

The snake-charmer was an evil-looking, powerful-smelling, ragged half-caste, with a tangled mane of hair, and a livid scar on his right cheek. Over his arm he carried a basket which contained the precious remedy. He squatted down on his haunches with the basket beside him. On the ground in front of him was a large wicker cage . . . he pushed up the lid and waited . . . slowly a blunt, almond-shaped head, with two glittering eyes, appeared above the walls of the cage. Like a flash the half-caste seized the snake

by the neck, just behind the head, and drew it towards him. He crooned over it, as a mother over her restless babe, and slowly his grasp relaxed. The snake twined its powerful body around his dirty arm and its forked tongue seemed to lick his hand. The laboratory attendants regarded the strange phenomenon with amazement for it was a *fer-de-lance*, the most savage of all snakes.

But the man meant the snake to bite him. He tapped it sharply on its blunt snout and the beast tried to wriggle away from him. He grasped it by the body and shook it . . . it threw back its head and, quick as lightning, struck at his hand. For a few seconds the fangs retained their grip; then he shook it off and one of the men pinned it to the ground with a forked stick. The man swaggered around exhibiting the two small punctures which proved that he had been bitten. From his basket he took a small bunch of pale green leaves, rolled them into a ball, placed them in his mouth, and chewed them into a paste. He applied the slimy mass to the wound and bound it up with a filthy rag; and, all the time, he manifested no signs of fear.

"That snake is yielding a full dose of venom," said the doctor. "It is a good test. We shall soon know whether his treatment has any value."

During the next two hours the Inspector learned a great deal about the manufacture of anti-venom. He saw snakes "milked" through rubber membranes into glass dishes; he saw them chloroformed and squeezed dry; he saw the process of drying the venom; he handled jars packed with yellow scales—containing incredible numbers of fatal doses of the deadly stuff. Then his host took him round the grounds and showed him the *serpentario* where the venomous snakes lived in small hives made of cement; he showed him the paddock where the horses for the serum work were kept.

Behind the paddocks was a dilapidated bungalow which was obviously uninhabited. The Director pointed to it.

"They say it is the home of evil spirits. More than twenty years ago one of our snakes escaped and killed a man in

that house. Nobody has lived there since . . . they say that it is—how do you call it? . . . haunted.”

“Now,” said Dr. Garros, when they were back in the laboratories again, “business. About what have you come to see me?”

“I have been told that some time ago a process was discovered for concentrating the venom of the fer-de-lance. Can you give me any information with regard to this discovery?”

The Doctor looked at his visitor curiously.

“How have you come to know of this?” he asked.

The Inspector gave him the details of the evidence of Professor Gerstein.

“I remember . . . it was mentioned in a paper I wrote on the toxicity of Lachesis venom.”

“The secret was lost?”

“Yes. It was the same year as the accident at the bungalow. An unlucky year! My favourite assistant, the best man I ever had, disappeared, taking with him some valuable material and documents. It was his own work, for he himself had discovered the process—but, of course, the manuscript and specimens were the property of the Institute. He took his secret with him and enough venom to poison a small town.”

“Can you describe him or let me have a photograph?”

“He was a dark man of medium height . . .”

An attendant entered and spoke rapidly to his Chief.

Garros turned to his guest: “The man is very bad; we will go and see him.”

The snake-charmer was lying on the ground and a boy was supporting his head. He was breathing rapidly, his face was bathed in sweat and he was moaning. The wound had been cleansed and there was a bluish halo around the two punctures. His arm was swollen and tense; when Garros touched it the man shrieked. The pulse was rapid and feeble.

The doctor took a knife from one of his assistants and made several deep incisions around the wound. The man

struggled but was held down whilst a reddish powder was applied to the cuts.

"I think we can regard the experiment as finished," said Garros to his guest. "I shall inject serum or he will die."

He stooped over the man and said something. The half-caste shook his head feebly.

"He may be a knave but he is honest. He still believes that his remedy will save him."

For some minutes the scientist fingered his beard reflectively; then he signalled to two assistants. They lifted the man and carried him indoors.

"I was tempted to wait and see what would happen, but it would have been murder," said Garros, when they were alone together again. "It is always the same with these native cures. What were we talking about? Oh, yes, that man Reuben Vetter . . . he had dark hair and eyes."

"Anything distinctive—scars, warts, moles?"

"Ah! He had a large scar on the left arm about eight centimetres above the head of the radius. The bite of a snake . . . you have seen what we do in such cases. There is generally a scar—a circular scar with a central depression."

The Inspector jotted down the details in a very shiny, official note-book.

"Any photograph of the man?" he asked.

"No, but I remember him fairly well. He was rather a striking man—good features and a prominent jaw."

"One more question. What is the quickest time you have ever known a snake to kill a man in?"

"Two minutes. One of the fangs pierced a vein and the poison went straight into the blood."

The return journey did not take long. After entertaining his guest hospitably, the doctor sent him back to his hotel in a small car which was used by the dispatch department for sending serum down to the quay.

In the evening the Inspector revised and amplified his notes. He had learned a great deal about snake venom but the information about Reuben Vetter was rather meagre and, after all, that was the most important part of his inquiry.

The boat was to leave for Rio in three days' time—only three days more! He would be sorry to say good-bye to Lucia. There's no fool like an old fool! . . . and the tropics are . . . the tropics! Not that he was that sort of fool . . . but every candle has a zone of ambient heat just beyond the danger point where wings are singed. Here is a subtle temptation which assails age and respectability, for sophistry can justify a judicious dalliance under the cloak of benevolence. And Inspector Rose had a large heart which matched his generous frame. He took a fatherly—yes, a fatherly—interest in the girl . . . she was a nice plump lass—the memory of her bending over him that night caused him a vague uneasiness.

Then he thought of Ellen and all she stood for in his life. He thought of their children, grown up and doing well; he thought of his wife's uncomplaining self-sacrifice and of her pride in his success. There are loyalties attaching to such a companionship, and he was essentially old-fashioned. Three days! So much the better.

Lucia knew a few words of English and she could be eloquent with her hands—it was not difficult for him to understand her meaning, even in her less demonstrative moments. At their next meeting she evidently had something important to communicate.

"Ingleesh . . . woman," she said. And she pointed towards the more squalid part of the town. "Ingleesh . . . woman . . . want . . . to see you."

Rose nodded. That was perfectly comprehensible. But what sort of woman? And why did she want to see him?

"When?" he asked.

"One . . . day. Evening."

"To-morrow?"

"Ees."

The girl flashed an invitation at him with her large eyes. "Walk?" she said. "Veree nice."

"Yes," he agreed, for it would have been a bad business if the wisdom of fifty years could not frustrate the wiles of this exotic beauty. Yet there can be no doubt that he would

have been extremely annoyed had he known the truth. For Lucia was merely trying to be nice to their elderly guest for the good of "the House". Her ministrations to him had been strictly professional, as he was to find out in the bill, later on. As for the free exposure of her charms to his gaze, it had merely been a tribute to his age and respectability—it never occurred to her that it could matter, for he was old enough to be her father.

So Inspector Rose kept Lucia at a respectful distance and the girl was hurt, for she felt that somehow she had failed to give satisfaction.

On the following evening she took him to see the "Ingleesh woman". Their quest led them into what was obviously the slum quarter of the town—tumble-down shanties, crowded together, shutting out light and air—refuse, filth and poverty. The girl tapped at the door of a disreputable hovel and left him there—the matter was no concern of hers, and she was not feeling pleased with her guest. For a few seconds he stood waiting . . . then a hand fumbled with the latch . . . the door slowly opened . . . and a face, illuminated by the flame of a guttering candle, peered out.

"Good evening," he said, for want of any better mode of introduction.

The woman was apparently middle-aged; her face, which was disfigured by deep scars around the nose and mouth, must at one time have been beautiful. She spoke with a flat, nasal intonation. "You are English?"

He nodded.

She held the door open and invited him to enter.

The interior of the hut was clean and tidy; her dilapidated dress showed signs of a pathetic attempt at neatness.

She pushed forward a chair.

"You probably wonder why I have sent for you," she said. "Perhaps it was merely an impulse, but I wanted to talk to a fellow-countryman again. I must seem to you an old woman, but, as a matter of fact, I am barely forty—for twenty years I have been the plaything of anyone who was willing to pay the price—and, year by year, my market

value has depreciated. Now, I can scarcely earn enough to keep me alive. Can you imagine what that means? A toy, at the mercy of men who know no mercy—men who regard you merely as the means to a base end—rough, uncultivated men of many races . . . who blend strange cruelties with the satisfaction of their lust. It was not so bad before this—” and she pointed to her scarred face—“for I could, to a certain extent, pick and choose. Now I must take what comes, or starve.”

The Inspector shifted uneasily in his seat and fumbled in his pockets.

The woman held up her hand. “No, I am not begging. I want you to do something for me when you return to England. There is a small village in Kent—with an old Elizabethan house; and across the bridge over the stream one can see the square tower of the church, covered with ivy. Behind the church is the Rectory. It was my home; my father was the Rector twenty-one years ago. I ran away from home to London, to the man who ultimately sold me to this life. My father was a stern man, but I loved my mother and the children—they were all much younger. Will you try to find out all about them and write and tell me? To them I am dead—I would not have it otherwise—but my heart longs for news of home.”

“Why not return to England?” he asked.

She held the candle to her face.

“Can you ask? The wages of sin—he loved to preach about them . . . and surely I have earned generous wages!”

She took a slip of paper from the table. “Here is the name and address.”

He folded it and placed it in his note-book without looking at the writing.

“Surely something can be done. It is never too late.”

“No. Once, many years ago, a man tried to save me. He died—an accident, people said, but I know better. He was killed, out of spite, by an American, a man named Vetter.”

“Vetter!” the Inspector repeated. “Tell me all about it.”

“There is nothing to tell. He was bitten by a snake, and

the next day the devil came and taunted me—bought me from the hag who was my keeper. I fought against it but she flogged me until I gave in. Then he used me to satisfy his lust and in the end cast me aside like a sucked orange.”

She shuddered and buried her face in her hands.

“I will find your parents if I can, and write to you,” he said. But all the time his mind was busy with this fresh evidence which chance had thrown in his way.

“This man Vetter. What sort of a man was he? Do you remember him?”

“Could I ever forget? His dark, evil face haunts me still. He was not a big man—an inch or two taller than I am.”

“Any marks to distinguish him by?”

“Yes, a scar on the left arm and another just here—an operation scar.”

“Appendicitis?”

“He did not say.”

Inspector Rose returned to the hotel and went straight to his room. He had forgotten all about Lucia.



PART TWO

CHAPTER I

FREEDOM

It was inconceivable that the Honourable Tony Burnby should want to commit suicide; and nobody could quite understand how he came to fall from a window on the fifth floor of the Astral Hotel. Fate had been especially kind to him in respect of wealth, birth, education, and temperament—men had always voted him a jolly good fellow and he was popular with the ladies. As far as the Lady Anne was concerned it was only a question of his waiting for a year or two until her noble and decrepit spouse died a natural death. In any case the aged invalid was no bar to their friendship, for he and all London—all London that matters—knew the Lady Anne and her principles. She was above reproach, out of reach of the breath of scandal, firmly entrenched behind a palisade of family pride and an untarnished reputation. Her care for the aged invalid was proverbial; her mien, sober and demure; her face, calm and sincere—"Madonna-like" her friends said. There were some who were inclined to accuse her of pride—pride in her own integrity—but such were few and feminine.

Dr. Barbara Elder read the account of the inquest with its inevitable verdict of "accidental death", and she cut it out of the newspaper. After breakfast she pasted it into a small note-book with other similar cuttings, and labelled it "3". With a sigh she returned the note-book to a receptacle which replaced the masculine pocket, and went down to the surgery.

She was acting as locum tenens for an elderly practitioner in the East End of London who was an ardent supporter

of woman's claim to medical equality. Unfortunately, as Barbara discovered to her cost, his patients—more especially the women—did not see eye to eye with him in this matter.

Helen had returned to her husband on a definite understanding which gave him little satisfaction, but, in a measure, restored his self-respect. Peter had been taken into partnership by Roderick Haynes. Life at the vicarage, lubricated by Kate's gentleness and tact, was progressing on normal lines, but in an atmosphere of unaccustomed geniality fostered by bulging offertory bags and an appreciative congregation.

Barbara, on the other hand, with all the freedom that the heart of emancipated womanhood could desire, in a position of responsibility yielding a reasonable income, was beginning to realize the limitations of Pandora's box. With the preacher she was inclined to protest that a "all is vanity". Helen no longer needed her; her father was content to see her at dinner once a week, if she could get the time; Peter was absorbed in his new occupation; Kate was resigned to the inevitable; and, to crown it all, the patients were not responsive. On two occasions a door had been shut—slammed—in her face with the remark that they wanted a proper doctor. And humility had never been Barbara Elder's strong suit. On the previous night she had been up for four hours with a difficult confinement case in a very dirty house; and she had returned home with some souvenirs which were still troubling her.

Kate had expressed surprise at the locality chosen by Barbara for fleshing her maiden scalpel, and had extracted what comfort she could from the statement that it would be "good experience". But, even in this, Barbara had not been strictly honest for she had taken Dr. Porter's "locum" with a very definite object which was not primarily concerned with medical experience. The long arm of coincidence had come to her assistance—for it was a very fortunate chance which had placed Bentik Street right in the middle of the practice of a man who appreciated lady doctors. Barbara had marked down the house which Mr. Potter

frequented and now she was in a position to proceed further with her investigations.

It was not an attractive neighbourhood. Life was drab, the sort of life which is contemplated by slatternly women from dirty doorsteps for subsequent embellishment and local distribution over a pot of beer. Barbara knew that it would only be necessary to wait for a nice big varicose ulcer, attached to a garrulous woman, in order to obtain all the information she required. And she was very curious with regard to the occupants of No. 27. As it happened she eventually obtained what she wanted from the wife of a rag-and-bone merchant—a woman who disapproved of doctors in general and Barbara Elder in particular.

But that was later on. For the moment her chief concern was that she was ten minutes late for surgery and a resentful clientele was signifying its disapproval in an unmistakable manner. From the back regions came a medley of sounds with which she was becoming well acquainted—hacking coughs, scuffling feet and squalling infants. She felt convinced that all the mothers stuck pins into their babies directly the clock struck nine.

She entered the small, bare consulting-room and tapped viciously at the brass bell which stood on the table—it was just like an antiquated practitioner to stick to that method for letting people know that he was ready to see them! There was a scuffling in the passage and the door opened admitting a small wasted woman, carrying a very large infant. Barbara switched on the light and the baby commenced to howl. The mother took a very dirty dummy from her pocket, licked it, rubbed it on her tattered skirt, and thrust it forcibly into the mouth of the protesting child.

"That's a bad habit," said Barbara sternly. "Dummies are bad for babies—more especially when they are dirty."

"Dirty!" the woman exclaimed. "Dirty! Oi clean it, an' yer saw me do it."

"But even if they are clean, they are bad things to use."

"A lot yer knows abaht kids, miss. 'Ave yer ever 'ad

any? 'Ave yer ever bin kep awake the 'ole bloomin' noight by er screamin' kid? Ef it adden bin fer thet there bit of inja-rubber I'd 'ave bin barmy long ago."

"What is the trouble?" Barbara asked, as a short cut out of a difficult situation. "Is the child ill?"

For answer the woman opened her ragged blouse and pointed to her right breast. It was red and swollen.

Barbara examined it gently and the woman cried out with pain.

"How old is the child?"

"Fifteen months."

"Are you still nursing?"

The woman burst into tears. "Milk corsts sich a deal of money," she said pitifully.

"You can't go on."

The woman nodded her head in a dazed fashion.

"You'll have to let them see to that at the Hospital. They'll give you something to send you to sleep whilst they do it."

Barbara produced a green card and gave it to the woman. "One-thirty, this afternoon," she said. "The Out-Patients' entrance in Green Street."

She slipped five shillings into the woman's hand. "That's to start the milk," she said, "but, for goodness sake, don't tell anyone about it."

The woman muttered a few awkward words of thanks and scuffled out of the room. Dr. Barbara Elder struck the bell again, but this time it was more a caress than a blow. A stout middle-aged man with a florid face and wearing a loud check suit, on which an assortment of liquid refreshment had been generously sprinkled, came in. He sat down heavily and began to cough—a loud, forced, irritating cough. "It's the bronchitis," he said, and began to unfasten his waistcoat.

Barbara stopped him. She was distrustful of that sort of man; he was one of the problems a lady doctor, of prepossessing appearance, had to face.

"Tell me about the cough. When is it troublesome?"

"Wakes me up in the early mornin'—coughs an' coughs 'til I feels like bustin'."

"It's your stomach, not your chest. Don't eat so much meat, don't drink so much spirits and take some bismuth and soda—a decent amount—last thing at night."

The man fumbled with his waistcoat.

"Ain't yer goin' to examine me?"

"No. If it'll give you any satisfaction I'll look at your tongue. That will tell me all I want to know."

"You're a dam' fine doctor! I pays my whack with the rest of 'em."

The girl jotted down a prescription. "Have that made up and take it this evening. You'll get full value for your money."

And once again the bell rang and a fresh problem presented itself to Barbara Elder. She saw a dozen people and then the procession came to an end—the bell tinged without response. She gave it a final tap. The door opened slowly, and through the smallest gap compatible with his stature appeared the bulging eyes, massive head and diminutive form of Mr. Rufus Jackett.

For a moment he gazed at her with a pair of eyes which looked as though they were set on stalks.

"Erlone?" he asked.

The girl nodded. "What are you doing here, Rufus?"

The boy put his finger to his lips. "Sh," he said. "I've got 'im agin . . . the Chink."

"I told you to drop it," said Barbara. "If they'd kept you that time I should have had to tell the Inspector that you were working for me, and it would have spoilt everything."

The boy picked up his cap and twisted it between his hands. "S'pity," he commented. "T'other goes to see 'im."

"Where?" said Barbara involuntarily.

"Dunno yet, but I'll soon find out."

"Well . . . perhaps you can come and see me again . . . if anything turns up."

Across the broad face of Mr. Rufus Jackett a grin of satisfaction spread in wide undulations, like a breeze on the surface of a field of standing corn. He held out a grimy hand and a crisp piece of paper rustled in the palm.

"Thank'y miss."

"Mind, you're working entirely on your own. I won't bail you out if you're caught again."

"Still, there's pickin's," he remarked, as he pocketed the fruits of his labours. And the left half of his face underwent a convulsive spasm which indicated that Mr. Rufus Jackett understood Dr. Barbara Elder better than she understood herself.

When the door closed she took out the note-book and studied the three cuttings.

The visiting list was a long one, and the fact that Rufus Jackett tangled himself up in the cases added greatly to the burden of her task. Even her ordinary cases were subject to this mysterious influence—behind the most simple nasal catarrh lurked the hidden menace of acute pneumonia; each harmless stomach-ache aped a fulminating appendicitis or suggested arsenic poisoning; whilst behind every headache grinned the spectral forms of meningitis and lockjaw. With short intervals for meals she worked until nearly ten o'clock in the evening—then there was the day-book to write up. At twelve o'clock she slipped into bed with a sigh of weary satisfaction; and as her head touched the pillow the humour of the situation struck her: "So this is freedom!" said Barbara Elder. And, as she said it, the night bell rang.

From childhood Aubrey Heylet had been in the habit of getting his own way; he chafed at opposition, and breakfast was not his best meal.

He carved two thin slices of ham, and arranged them tastefully on the plate.

"Do you think your mistress would eat more than that?" he asked.

Bessie measured the helping with a practised eye.

"She takes very little for breakfast, sir."

"Perhaps I might go up and see her if she is awake?"

A smile flitted across the girl's face.

"I expect she would like you to take it up, sir!"

Aubrey picked up the tray and went upstairs.

A process of reconstruction is often more difficult than building—there is so much to be pulled down; piles of refuse to be carted away; rotten foundations to be strengthened. It was not easy for a man of his temperament for, hitherto, self had always occupied the first place. He had fought his own battles with comparative success, indeed, his recent experiences had most effectually dispelled his lethargy. He was a man again. But in his renewed strength he was impatient of opposition and intensely desirous of Helen's love. She was his; yet he dare not claim her—it had been part of the bargain, and any false step might spell disaster.

He tapped at the door and went in.

"Good morning, my dear," he said.

"Hallo, Aubrey! You should have let Bessie bring it up."

"I wanted to see how you were."

He placed the tray on a table beside the bed, picked up a dainty wrap and handed it to her.

She sat up in bed and stretched her arms wearily above her head.

"I'm sleeping badly—I don't think I shall ever rest until they catch that man."

He stooped over her, and, instinctively, she drew away.

"Thanks, Aubrey," she said. "You are very good."

The man took her hand.

"I love you, my dear."

She smiled at him with her lips, but her eyes were cold.

"Love is the delusion of fools."

"Is that all you want?" he asked.

"Yes, thanks."

He went slowly downstairs. He had been a fool to go up . . . the sight of her . . . the intimate details of her

room . . . her lack of response! If only she would come away for a time, travel, forget the past in the pleasant excitement of new scenes and experiences! Then he might have a chance. In his renaissance Aubrey was morbidly conscious of the burden of idleness—there was nothing for him to do that really mattered, the world slipped by regardless of his very existence. Why had he lost that spirit of contentment? If he died nobody would be a penny the worse for it, scarcely a ripple would show on the surface of life to mark the spot where he had fallen. If only Helen would forgive and forget everything would be different, they could make a fresh start together; possibly even . . . but he dared not think of that.

There was a curse on their set—Tony Burnby, with all his wit and geniality . . . an accident! For the sake of the family. . . . But, of course, nobody really believed it. And it had thrown Helen right back again, for Lady Anne was one of her intimate friends, and everybody knew of the association between Tony and Lady Anne—a clean, wholesome friendship . . . but one could not help thinking. And, of course, it recalled the murder trial, for the authorities had insisted on a very careful examination, and Andrew Gerstein had been called in to help Bryan Priestley. Coming at such a time it was most unfortunate for Aubrey Heylet.

Automatically he fled to the consolation of his cigar-box and, as he snipped the end, a line of Kipling came back to him:

“A woman is only a woman, but a good cigar
is a smoke.”

But the vision of Helen, sitting up in bed, gave the lie direct to such a philosophy.

CHAPTER II

LADY ANNE CARSTAIR

HELEN put the book down.

"How good of you to come, Anne!" she exclaimed. "I sometimes get very tired of my own company, and this afternoon Aubrey is playing at Queen's Club; he's taken up tennis again."

It was not difficult, as a rule, to understand why her friends had christened Anne Carstair "the Madonna", for, in repose, her face was exactly of the type depicted by the Old Masters, and the effect was heightened by the simple way her hair was dressed.

This afternoon, however, nobody would have detected any resemblance, for the essence of the face of "Our Lady" is repose, and it was obvious that Lady Anne was harassed and distressed.

She was wearing a simple black dress, and on her hands, which were fine and white, she had no jewellery except a thin gold wedding-ring.

"Poor Anne!" said Helen.

"He meant just everything to me."

"Helen," she went on. "Have you ever thought what it is like to be tied to an old man—to watch him slipping day by day into his second childhood, which is only a kindly way of expressing his dotage? Of course, it was my own fault, but I was young and sentimental—some mistaken idea of self-sacrifice . . . and I hadn't met Tony."

Helen interrupted her: "Stop, Anne! Don't say anything which you may regret later on."

"I must, my dear. You may be able to help me."

She opened her bag, took out a letter and handed it to her friend.

"What do you make of that?" she asked. "I received it yesterday."

The note-paper was headed "The Regent Hotel", and the letter was neatly penned in a sloping handwriting.

MADAM,

I came across the enclosed letter to-day. In view of the intimate nature of its contents I am returning it to you. Should you wish to communicate with me the above address will find me during the next four days.

Yours faithfully,

LUCY EXTON.

"And the enclosure?"

The girl flushed. "It was a letter to Tony from me—an indiscreet letter."

"But you have got it back."

"There were others . . . he kept them together . . . impossible letters for anyone to see now that he is dead."

"Then . . ."

"Yes. I am convinced that this is only the first move. What am I to do?"

"You can't do much until she shows her hand. She may be merely bluffing. You might write and acknowledge the letter. For the time being I shouldn't do anything else."

"But I want to be prepared. Supposing she tries to blackmail me on the others? I was never really faithless to my husband, but nobody would believe me in the face of those letters."

"I am sure there is only one safe thing to do—to put it in the hands of the police. They will deal with the woman."

"The police! But that would mean a prosecution, all the publicity of the Police Court, his name and mine . . . to provide a sensational case for the evening papers."

"But the names are suppressed in such cases."

"How can they be in a case like this? I should be Mrs. X, he . . . the late Mr. Z, and to everybody who knew us it would be perfectly obvious. Can't you see, Helen, how impossible it is? How can I allow his name to be tarnished now that he is dead? Helen! Did Tony kill himself because of this?"

"Once one gives way to such threats, they never leave you alone. Can't you face it?"

"Not those letters. I was mad . . . mad with love . . . passion . . . an insane desire to keep him. I was jealous, too—and when a woman is jealous she will say or do anything. I would pay a fortune to get them back."

"But they never let you go, Anne. If you give in to them there is no guarantee. They'll hold on to you until they've sucked you dry. I know, for I paid the price, and he kept something back. It may be all right. Perhaps that was the only letter she found, or she may be honest."

For five days Lady Anne Carstair heard nothing more, and she began to hope that her fears were groundless. It was inconceivable that Tony could have run the risk of their being found—then the thought occurred to her that in going over his papers the executors might have come across them—if, on the other hand, he committed suicide, he would certainly have destroyed them. And so her mind worked, in endless circles, around the problem. The sight of the old man, whose name she had taken, mumbling platitudes and following her movements with senile solicitude, added fuel to the flame of her self-contempt. He had always trusted her, her friends had always trusted her—*dame sans peur et sans reproche*. And all the time she was playing a part . . . a hypocrite's part. When she had Tony it had been so easy to justify . . . but now . . .

Then the woman came to see her—a fragile slip of a girl with curly brown hair and pale cheeks, lightly touched with rouge.

The story she told was sufficiently discreditable to be true. She was a child of the streets—in the power of a man who lived on her earnings. She had met the Hon. Tony Burnby at a night-club, and they had become intimate—for short periods at irregular intervals she had been his mistress. One night she had drugged the whisky and investigated the contents of his safe—she spoke of it as if

it were part of her regular routine. Inside she found a bundle of letters which past experience told her might be of value. Then he had died, and, for a time, the letters were forgotten. On reading them later, something made her relent. In a state of indecision she had returned one of the letters, reserving the others for future consideration—she could not make up her mind what to do, for she wanted money.

The man had discovered the letters under her pillow, and her ladyship would probably be able to guess the use he intended to make of them. The Honourable Tony had always treated her "fair" and she would do her best to undo the harm which she had done—get the letters back if possible. She wanted no reward . . . if only she could rely on her ladyship's protection afterwards. She would write if there was anything to report.

A week later she came again. There were black rings around her eyes and her pale face was innocent of rouge. She had failed. The night before he had been drinking heavily—more heavily than usual—he had seemed to be in a stupefied condition: she had seized the opportunity to get the letters.

But she had misjudged his condition, he had been sufficiently sober to appreciate what she was doing . . . and. . . . The girl slipped down her flimsy blouse. Across the white skin of her back were weals—blue and red streaks . . . here and there the skin was broken, and there was blood. It was nothing unusual . . . a riding whip . . . he often used it when trade was bad. But he had hidden the letters and she did not know where.

"How much does he want for the letters?"

The girl did not know—she would not help him. There were the police. Would her Ladyship put the police on his track? She herself would have done so long ago only she was afraid . . . he was a terrible man when he was roused. And the girl shivered, as she caressed the marks of his brutality.

But Lady Anne knew that it was the one thing she could not do. More impossible than ever now that she knew his shameful secret—a secret which would make a mockery of her passion for the man, a secret which must ever be a secret, for it cut at her pride . . . she had been unable to keep his love.

"Can you find out for me what he will take?"

"Yes, I can try."

"Then come and see me again in a week's time."

For some time after the girl had gone Anne sat gazing at the wall in front of her—she could see him there . . . he was everywhere—the man who had stolen her heart, her honour, her happiness, and then . . . sought satisfaction in the arms of that painted creature. She went up to the invalid. It was nine o'clock. She picked up the medicine bottle on the mantelpiece and carefully measured out a dose. The invalid smiled at her feebly.

"Thanks, dear. You are very good to an old man."

She arranged his pillows, kissed him on the forehead, and switched off the light. The fire flickered and the wire guard made patterns on the white ceiling.

"Good night," she said.

In the meanwhile Lady Anne's visitor had returned to her flat. A man was awaiting her arrival.

"Well?" he said.

The girl made a grimace as her cloak slid from her shoulders.

"That damned Chinaman hurt like the devil," she said. "How much extra do I get for that?"

"It all depends," said the man. "You let the other slip through your fingers. How are things going with the Lady Anne?"

"According to programme. She's looking rotten—not sleeping well, I expect. That's the first stage."

CHAPTER III

BARBARA GETS ON

DR. BARBARA rolled over in bed. Her mind was pleasantly at rest; she went to sleep again. The unexpected return of Dr. Porter had given her two days off duty, and she meant to make the best of the time. An hour later a pleasant chink of tea-things roused her from her slumbers; then the curtain rings rattled and a heavy dray went noisily down the road.

"What sort of a day is it, Hetty?" she asked.

"Fair to middlin', miss, but it's rainin'."

Who cared if it did rain? Two whole days and no patients to see! Two whole nights, and no night bell! Two whole days and nights, and no . . . at any rate, she would have a hot bath and hope for the best.

"You might turn on the hot water, Hetty," she called after the girl. It always took a long time to fill that bath, and she meant to wallow.

For five minutes she snuggled down and listened to the lazy flow of the water—it was a severely utilitarian house, with everything on the top of everything else. She had heard Dr. Porter snoring, and she had heard the night bell, and part of what he said about it. Human nature is strangely callous; she enjoyed her bed even more after that. She jumped up, picked up a sponge and towel, threw a wrap over her shoulders, and slipped into the bathroom. She would give Peter a surprise, have tea with Helen, and sleep at the Vicarage. And the water was hot! That was a thing that one could never be sure of. In some ways Barbara was fastidious; she had never grown accustomed to insect parasites—even at the Hospital—and, as she contemplated their ravages on her long, white body, it dawned upon her that a West-End practice must possess distinct advantages. There was always a feeling that the same insect had been feeding on somebody else at no distant date.

But such matters were mere trifles to-day for she was free. Moreover, she had discovered who lived at number twenty-seven Bentik Street. Mrs. Maferty, who occupied number thirty-two on the other side of the street, had told her. A good deal of tact was needed, for the lady was surly and uncommunicative—nobody would ever have accused Mrs. Maferty of being a gossip.

The top floor of number twenty-seven was occupied by two Chinamen who wore ordinary European clothes and only went out after dark. The facts had been hurled at Barbara's head because she happened to make the statement that no foreigners would be likely to live in Bentik Street. It was a long shot but scored a bull—she had studied Mrs. Maferty carefully and knew her love of contradiction. It did not carry Barbara very far in her investigations but seemed in a measure to justify her suspicions.

When she got down to breakfast Dr. Porter had gone to the surgery. She was glad of that, for he could be a bore and she did not want to talk shop.

At nine-thirty she took the underground to South Kensington and deposited her bag at the Vicarage. Her mother received her with open arms, and the vicar was out.

"I'm sure he would have stayed in, dear, had he known you were coming," said Kate, with pathetic loyalty.

"Oh, well! . . . Never mind. Come and do some shopping with me, mum. I'm fearfully wealthy, and my clothes are only fit for a jumble sale."

For two hours they shopped, and then Barbara said good-bye to her mother and went in search of Peter. He never went out to lunch until half-past one and she meant to catch him at the critical moment.

The office was almost deserted except for Miss Joanna Shields, who informed Barbara that Mr. Pantom was in. For the first time Barbara realized that Miss Shields was attractive, that she dressed very nicely, and that she had dainty feet and hands. It also occurred to her that the young lady and Peter seemed to be in sole possession.

The girl returned.

"Mr. Panton can see you," she said, with a smile. Barbara wondered if she smiled at Peter like that—of course, Peter was not susceptible, but there was a streak of sentiment in his nature which introduced an element of uncertainty.

"Thank you," she said. And Joanna opened the door into the junior partner's office.

Peter glanced up from the paper he was studying.

"Half a minute, Babs," he said. "There's a chair over there."

And she had been looking forward to this moment all the morning!

She sat down and took stock of her surroundings. She looked at the mantelpiece—there was a small clock in the centre, nothing else. She glanced at his desk but found it equally unsatisfactory. And he always used to say that she inspired his work! Peter was changed. He was wearing a neat, dark, lounge suit and a starched collar; moreover his desk was tidy. Somebody must help him with that. Barbara thought of the trim figure and masterly efficiency of Miss Joanna Shields. Peter put down the document and pressed a white button on his desk. The lady entered.

"I'm going out to lunch," he said. "Will you put that back in the safe." And he handed her a formidable bunch of keys.

She took the paper from the table. "You have an appointment at three o'clock."

He smiled at the girl. "Yes, I shan't forget."

Miss Shields went out, closing the door quietly behind her.

Peter looked at Barbara. "She's a wonderful person," he volunteered.

"Aren't you glad to see me?"

"Of course I am."

"Then why?"—there was a tremble in her voice—"then why are you so undemonstrative?"

"But, my dear girl, you hate sentiment; you have spent quite a lot of time telling me so."

"Yes, but you used to be so different."

"Ah! One learns a great deal in a lawyer's office."

Barbara got up. "Well, give me some lunch at any rate, for I'm famished."

The restaurant that Peter patronized was small but select, and the table, which he regarded as his own special property from one-thirty to two-thirty, was in a secluded corner. Woe betide the casual visitor who infringed the rights of regular customers—cooks in white caps and waiters with starched shirt-fronts would chase him to the ignominy of some less coveted position. And the stranger would grumble and vow never to come again, until he had sampled the special grill, when, as often as not, he would change his mind and become one of the elect.

"What are you going to have?" Peter asked.

"Fillet of steak. I'm quite consistent in my habits."

"Jolly sensible! The last girl I brought here chose a pot of tea and two poached eggs, which was inviting the wrath of the gods. Old Bertrand dropped a chop into the fire, and it nearly ruined my reputation."

"Peter, what have you done with my photograph?—the one which you said was an inspiration to your work."

Peter was no good at prevarication. "I burnt it," he said, "that evening . . . you remember."

For a few moments Barbara was silent. "I must have been a beast," she remarked.

"You were," he agreed. And the steak arrived.

It was not altogether a satisfactory meal for Barbara. Miss Shields intruded; and she was jealous—jealous of her constant association with Peter. It is never nice to witness the alienation of one's property, and, since childhood, she had regarded Peter as her very own. Now he seemed to be slipping away—of course, there was no reason to associate him with Joanna, but her position provided unusual opportunities and anyone would find Peter attractive.

"Coffee?" He offered a cigarette.

"Thanks."

"How's the jolly old practice?"

She did not like his levity—Peter had always been a serious person.

"So, so!" she replied. "Peter, I'm terribly wealthy. Give me a treat and let me take you out to dinner and a theatre this evening."

"Can't be done, Babs. I'm working for an exam. and there's a lecture this evening—rather an important lecture."

"Oh! Cut the rotten old lecture for once."

But he shook his head.

The girl turned away and gazed out of the window. Peter contemplated her left ear, then he glanced at the slender white hand which was clenched on her knee. And at that moment a clear drop of water fell on to the hand. "Babs," he said. "I expect I can miss the lecture. I should love to spend the evening with you." And he gently wiped away the drop of water with his table napkin.

"I've been overworking," said Barbara apologetically.

Helen Heylet greeted her friend with enthusiasm.

"What luck!" she exclaimed. "I was just going to write to you."

"Important?"

"Important for someone, and possibly for all of us. You have met Lady Anne Carstair here two or three times."

Barbara nodded. She remembered Lady Anne very well indeed and she was not keen on her.

"She's in a terrible fix. Yesterday she asked me to talk it over with you."

"Blackmail?"

"Yes."

"I'm not surprised. It is a dangerous game to play with fire on the strength of your reputation."

Barbara opened her bag and took out a small note-book. "Of course, it was suicide," she said, pointing to cutting number three. "I knew they would go for her next, for obviously it—whatever it is—must concern her as well."

"It's letters—some letters which she wrote to Tony

Burnby." Helen gave her the details as she had heard them from Lady Anne.

"That's clever," Barbara exclaimed. "But I don't think I should waste much sympathy on the girl. We could have her followed next time she goes to see Anne, I know a boy who will hang on to her like a leech. The authorities seem to have gone to sleep. Inspector Rose returned from South America three months ago, and the vile business is more active than ever. Has it ever struck you, Helen, that all these cases seem to centre around this part of London? They must be the work of one man—any other idea is inconceivable . . . and I believe that when this man is found they will have caught the murderer of Paul Marks."

"Why don't you take it up again? You once said that you would know where to begin."

"Yes. There were two things I wanted to know, but it meant raking up all the old scandal."

Helen leant forward. "What are they?"

The other hesitated for a moment. "Why did you go back to Paul Marks again that time, after you had promised me to give him up?"

Helen shrugged her shoulders. "Temper!" she said. "Just temper. Aubrey had heard some scandal and took me to task."

"Somebody must have put him up to it. He would never have done that sort of thing on his own. Who was responsible for that?"

"As a matter of fact, it was your revered father. Aubrey told me one day when I taxed him with precipitating the crisis."

"Pater!"

"I'm afraid so. He told Aubrey that I was visiting Paul Marks at his flat—and, at that time, it was not true."

"Well, that isn't very helpful. The other thing I want to find out is how Lady Inglemere got to know Paul Marks. The man was obviously an adventurer—an outsider—and we may conclude that the introduction was, deliberately arranged."

disturbed by bickerings on one side and recriminations on the other. Neither of them was at a time of life that induces tolerance or forbearance. It was unfortunate for Barbara that she had arrived in the midst of one of these domestic storms. The *lares* and *penates* of Jane Hubbard had been removed to the care of her brother, the Rector of Bickenhall; and Jane herself intended to follow her luggage at an early date, as a protest against her treatment.

It was therefore with some satisfaction that Miss Jane announced her inability to solve the problem—the diaries, which occupied a fair-sized trunk, had also been dispatched to Bickenhall to await her convenience. It had often happened before, and generally ended in the return of the boxes, by carrier, to Kensington. Sometimes Maimie apologized; more often she did not, and Jane swallowed her pride.

When the lady came in she was short of breath and very red in the face. Barbara, who understood these symptoms, was sorry for her—it must be very trying to pander to Maimie Inglemere, more especially when one was feeling restless and irritable. It is possible that Jane Hubbard was sensitive to her friendly attitude, for, as she turned to leave the room, she said:

“I will look it up, Dr. Elder, and let you know.”

In the evening Barbara taxed her father with the part he had played in precipitating the crisis with Helen Heylet.

“In any case, it was false,” she affirmed. “Who told you that she was visiting his flat?”

“It was told to me in confidence,” and with this unsatisfactory statement Barbara had to be content.

CHAPTER IV

RUFUS JACKETT IS TEMPTED OF THE DEVIL

“WELL?” said Lady Anne. “Have you found out?”

“Yes, but it’s absurd. He’s asking too much.”

“Tell me.”

The girl moistened her lips. "Five thousand pounds."

"Yes. That *is* absurd. Would he take less?"

"No. But he'll beat me again."

But Lady Anne was not inclined to waste any sympathy on her visitor, she was feeling very sorry for herself. Five thousand pounds! It sounded a large sum, but she was very wealthy, with the prospect of a vast increase in the near future. What would five thousand pounds matter then? The income tax would take that and more each year; and, after all, that was only a form of legalized robbery.

"I must think it over," she said. "Ask him to give me a week or two."

The girl seized her hand. "Won't you see the police about it, my lady? It would be far better."

Lady Anne disengaged her hand. "No, let me know if you can make any better terms."

As the front door closed on the unwelcome visitor a small misshapen figure detached itself from a pillar and followed her.

Rufus had a pound in his pocket and the prospect of another to follow—he was feeling well pleased with himself, for Barbara had smiled on him. The girl too was quite easy to follow. She swung along at an even pace and did not look round. Rufus whistled a tune softly to himself; it was money for nothing; moreover, she was a smart girl, and he was at the impressionable age of nineteen—nineteen and never been kissed, for girls did not fancy his appearance. He noted her free and easy carriage, the swing of her hips, her straight back and trim ankles. He crept up nearer to the girl, for he was curious and wanted to see her face. Suddenly she turned round—they were under a lamp—and the smile of invitation was unmistakable.

Rufus Jackett was torn between duty and inclination for never before had a girl looked at him like that. Possibly he could combine the two, for it was his job—he had been paid—to find out where she lived. The girl took his arm and the wits of Mr. Rufus Jackett went wool-gathering—what a stunner she was! And didn't she just smell nice!

He never remembered anybody smelling quite like that before.

Rufus was a poor conversationalist, but no great demand was made upon him, for the girl was giving him the story of her life—a pathetic phantasy of outraged maidenhood in a setting of green fields and thatched cottages. Mr. Jackett felt keenly the tragedy of it all, for he was a romantic lad and had studied life chiefly from the sixpenny seats of a picture palace. He had often heard of such doings and here he was face to face with the real thing.

He was aroused from his reverie by the prosaic sound of a latchkey grating in a refractory lock. It yielded to persuasion and the girl led the way upstairs to a small room on the first floor. It was a bed-sitting-room, meagrely furnished, but the susceptibilities of Mr. Jackett were not offended, for it was the only type of sitting-room with which he was familiar.

The girl pointed hospitably to the only arm-chair in the room and produced from a small cupboard a bottle of cheap port and two glasses. She drew the cork with a masterly hand and poured out the wine.

"Cheerio," she said, and drained her glass.

Rufus followed her example and promptly choked.

"Golly! ain't it strong?"

The girl laughed.

"It'll do you good, the doctors always recommend it."

She replenished his glass and Rufus grinned.

"It's foine an' sweet," he remarked with the air of a connoisseur—he was certainly beginning to enjoy himself.

For some time he revelled in the unaccustomed luxury of his surroundings—Woman and Wine! He had seen a film with that title somewhere.

"Why were you following me, dearie?"

The question insinuated itself into his consciousness—it seemed to come from a distance. Now, why had he been following the girl? He fumbled vaguely in his pocket and produced a pound note . . . it was something to do with that. . . . Ah! now he remembered.

"Tell me, dearie," she whispered.

"The woman doctor told me ter"—it shot out almost before he knew what he was saying . . . that red, sweet stuff seemed to muddle him, kept singing in his head.

"Why?" asked the girl.

Rufus put his finger to his lips.

"'Sh," he said, "it's a secret. She's after 'em—'im and the Chink."

"Oh!" said the girl and a faint whistle came from her painted lips. "So that's the game! Who is this woman doctor?"

But Rufus was beginning to have doubts.

"Ah!" he said. "That's tellin'."

The girl was too clever to press her advantage; she did not want to frighten the lad, at any rate not until she had discussed the matter with "the boss". It was a case of Samson and Delilah over again and, as before, Samson had not even a sporting chance.

"Then you will come and see me again next Thursday?" she said, at last.

"But wot abaht the woman doctor?"

For a moment there was silence, then she leapt to her feet and stood before him, a picture of outraged affection.

"I hate her," she said passionately. "I'm jealous. You're my boy now . . . promise me you won't see her again."

And Rufus promised. The girl kissed him. "Very well, then, you can meet me again next Thursday, at 9 o'clock, outside the Marble Arch Cinema. Don't forget—Thursday—9 o'clock—Marble Arch Cinema."

"Not 'arf," said Mr. Jackett, and he sealed the compact with a portentous wink.

Barbara Elder waited in vain for a visit from Rufus Jackett. She returned to the practice and the work kept her fully occupied—too busy to worry unduly about his default. Her two possible lines of investigation had failed to throw any light on the mystery, and Peter was inclined to monopolize her thoughts. London was sweltering in a

heat wave which was almost tropical, and all the characteristic features of East End life seemed to be correspondingly intensified.

The streets were more airless; the pavements radiated heat in the brilliant sunlight; people perspired more freely; neglected houses smelt more abominably; children were more irritable, parents less tolerant; creatures of a higher order were more sluggish, whilst lower down the scale of life they seemed to become more active. It is little wonder that Barbara found her immediate duties sufficient to occupy her whole attention.

One morning a letter arrived from Jane Hubbard. The boxes had returned to town under the kindly auspices of Messrs. Pickfords—she had unpacked them and remembered her promise to Barbara. Moreover, she had found a reference to Paul Marks and his introduction to Lady Inglemere. Barbara read the extract and, in her depressed physical and mental state, was merely conscious of a mild feeling of disappointment—there was not much help there. The man had been introduced with some other members of a small English club which was touring Paris at the time. They were known as “The Plovers”, and, with her usual hospitality, Lady Inglemere had sent them an invitation.

For Rufus Jackett the week that must elapse before he could see his “best gal” again seemed a very long one. For the moment his work was “casual”, and the intervals allowed him plenty of time for reflection. “Golly, what a stunner she was! . . . that last kiss . . . he could just about do with a few more of that sort.” Wiser heads have been turned by feminine wiles, and it never occurred to Rufus to doubt her sincerity. It was, of course, strange—for he knew his defects—but stranger things had happened.

An hour before the appointed time he was waiting at the rendezvous. The brilliant lights and gay advertisements occupied his attention at first; a policeman passed by and eyed him suspiciously. What did he care? A chap might meet his girl without any shame. A couple of “flappers”

looked at him and giggled—poor things they were compared with his girl. A man dressed in rusty black gave him a tract: "Your sins will find you out." S'treuth! He thought of dainty garments, sweet wine, and lips like cherries . . . pouting at him from a face covered with fragrant powder. He whistled a tune which bore a spectral resemblance to the wedding march from Lohengrin.

At ten minutes past nine he saw her standing in the shadow on one side of the brilliant portico. She beckoned to him and sauntered away towards Orchard Street. Rufus followed at a discreet distance; he was sure that for some reason she did not want him to join her yet—then he saw the policeman again. He went across the road and kept pace with her on the opposite pavement. Twice she looked round; then she joined him.

"He loves me too," she volunteered. "But *you* are my boy now."

And Rufus puffed out his meagre chest in the pride of conquest, for the policeman had seemed to him to be a very fine fellow indeed—albeit policemen were things to be avoided as a general rule. He was no expert in feminine wiles, nor did he try to explain or define his feelings. What need to submit such high emotion to the base expedient of crude dissection? Sufficient to bask in the mystery of a woman's love, and to-night Elsie—that was what she called herself—was lavish of her affection. And in her munificence was an element of sincerity—for she realized his innocence—a quality which rarely crossed her path. There was something of pathos, too, in his silent worship. She could not afford, however, to be sentimental, for there was work to be done.

"This Chinaman, dearie, who is he?"

Rufus returned from the stars.

"'Im as goes to see t'other."

"And who is this other?"

"The chap wot killed the Jew."

The girl rewarded him with a kiss and puffed at her cigarette.

"You can go and see the lady doctor now if you like. But, remember, not a word about me or you will never see me again. If she finds out anything more about that man—the one the Chinaman goes to see—you must tell me. You can come here every Thursday evening."

Rufus smiled—there would be more pickings and the girl as well.

"Well?" said Barbara sternly. "Why have you not been to see me before?"

"'Cos there warn't nothink to tell yer."

"Well then, tell me about the pretty lady."

"Lidy! What're yer gettin' at, miss?"

"The lady who has induced you to wash your hands, brush your hair, and buy a new tie."

He grinned—a sheepish grin in which there was obviously relief.

"Ah!" he said. "That's 'er."

"Oh, well; there won't be anything more doing this end, Rufus; and I advise you to be careful, or the police may get you again."

"Thank ye, miss."

Barbara gazed thoughtfully at the door through which Mr. Rufus Jackett had made his exit.

Another string had snapped. The treacherous little devil!

CHAPTER V

PAWNS

THERE was a very definite rift in the domestic lute. Ellen Rose traced it back to the time when her husband had gone to South America, to the time when that shameless Mexican hussy had nursed him through his attack of malaria. He had never been the same since his return—preoccupied, irritable and moody, quick to take offence, less demonstrative of his affection for her. It had never been his custom to

discuss his work with her, so she could not realize that he was facing a problem which could make or mar his career. It was the biggest case that had ever come his way and, so far as he could see, he was no nearer to a solution.

If luck threw into his hands a man with a scar on the left wrist and another over the appendix region, he might be in a position to do something—but chance did not play benevolent pranks of that sort. His men had succeeded in picking up again the boy with the large head and prominent eyes, and he was being carefully shadowed. Beyond that they had accomplished absolutely nothing. And his superiors were becoming restive at the steady increase in blackmail and the impunity with which the work was carried on—always sufficient inside information to guarantee the silence of the victim.

But Ellen only knew that he was not contented, that he was less affectionate, inclined to complain at trifles, to take offence readily. It fretted her, and she began to reproach him, to be suspicious, to wonder what he was doing when he was away from home at unusual hours. More and more, he absented himself from the house.

Then she found the hair. It was a long, golden hair, which twined itself about her finger when she picked it off his coat—a hair which reminded her of the silver threads which seemed more numerous every time she looked in the mirror. She said nothing about it—it cut too deep for words—but day by day that hair tightened its grip.

And Herbert Rose was not deceived. He knew that she was beginning to doubt his fidelity—unthinkable that Ellen could distrust him after all those years of loving intercourse. Women were queer creatures! It was not his place to pander to her jealousy and disillusion her. There was something evil in the air—venom—some even more subtle poison, with the power to destroy soul as well as body. It was undermining the whole social fabric; and, without doubt, it centred around that beastly thing—that vague, sinister shadow which eluded his grasp. His work absorbed him to the exclusion of all other interests—in his brief

moments of relaxation he fled to the chess club, which is only another form of hard work. In every problem he saw a reflection of his daily struggle, and in the night he was haunted by the fear of ultimate failure. He worried Gerstein to the limit of endurance, both at home and in the laboratory, in the hope that some chance word might put him on the scent; and, over the chessboard, he came to know Anitra very well indeed. The helpless girl appealed to his protective instincts—he had been fond of escorting children and nursemaids, with perambulators, across the road when he was a constable. He was able to get rid of some of his superfluous benevolence in this way.

To-night, however, Anitra was in a dictatorial mood, for she had won handsomely.

"You *do* neglect your pawns, Uncle Inspector," she said.

The man looked ruefully at his beleaguered king.

"Yes," he agreed, with humility, "I suppose it is one of my weaknesses."

"Yes, *one* of them." She tapped a white pawn on its little hard round knob. "You see," she continued, frowning at the chastened man, "he's dead; but I used him as a trap to catch the knave—that black knight—that's how I won."

The big man arose stiffly from his chair.

"By gum, missy, you're right. That pawn wasn't much use in itself, but it could trap the knave." He slapped his thigh.

"By Jove, it's worth trying . . . a pawn to catch the knave!"

He said good-bye but forgot his customary pat on the head, which signified preoccupation. He was nearly run over twice on the way home—once by a taxicab and later by a coster's barrow. To Ellen's surprise and gratification, he smacked her with hearty goodwill, as she was preparing for bed, and exclaimed. "By gum, I'll try it, old girl." It was not much of an overture, but Ellen Rose was easily satisfied.

"Oh, Bert!" she said, with dawning hope. Then, with true feminine inconsistency, she flung her arms around his neck and wept.

"Ellen," he said, "I'm sorry. I've been a beast."

"I 'xpect we both 'ave," she sobbed. "But, oh Bert, it was that 'air!"

"Hair! What hair?"

"A long, golden one . . . it was on your sleeve."

The man sat down on the edge of the bed and roared with laughter.

"I guess that belonged to Anitra," he said. "She always was a forward minx."

He drew his plump wife on to his knee, and told her the tragic story of Anitra Gerstein.

"Poor kiddy!" said the good woman. "You always 'ad a kind 'eart, Bert!" And she got into bed.

For some time after the light was out there was silence; then the Inspector muttered in a sleepy voice, "A pawn to catch the knave. By gum, it's worth trying!"

But Ellen Rose was not listening. She was fast asleep.

The next morning Inspector Rose journeyed eastward. He gazed for a minute, reflectively, at the arrow pointing to "the surgery", then he went up the steps to the front door and knocked. A harassed domestic opened the door.

"If it's the dochter, shure she's in the surgery; if it's the gas you're wantin', the maiter's in the scullery," she said in one breathless effort.

"No, my gell, no. It's Doctor Elder I want to see on private business," said the Inspector with dignity.

She ushered him into a small room and dusted a chair with her apron.

"Shure, thin, ye'll need to wait, fer she's deshprate busy this mornin'."

The Inspector signified his willingness to await Dr. Elder's convenience.

"Convainience! It'll be no convainience," said the girl. "She's that run off her legs that she has to finish her males before she stharts."

"Poor little pawn!" the big man whispered, to the girl's amazement. For a moment she gazed at him, and then fled from the room.

For twenty minutes he sat in solitary state, contemplating a carpet, with a floral pattern, which must once have seen better days. On the walls were oleographs of fictitious blooms and inedible fruits; on the mantelpiece a heavy marble clock which was not going; in the hearth were some Cape poppies which had succumbed to their environment and were suffering from pernicious anæmia. There was a parrot in the window, a grey parrot, which blinked solemnly at him but refused to talk. For want of any more cheerful subject Inspector Rose thought of parrot disease, and edged away from the ill-omened bird.

The parrot eyed Inspector Rose and he returned its stare. He did not hear the door open.

"You're quite right, Inspector. It's a damned dreary place and the parrot doesn't help any—as our trans-atlantic cousins would say."

He lumbered to his feet and took her outstretched hand.

"Good morning, Miss Elder . . . er . . . Doctor . . . I wanted . . . to . . ."

"Don't get flurried, Inspector. Won't you sit down?"

"You may remember . . . some time ago, you thought you were . . . er . . . on the track of . . . something."

"Yes," she laughed. "And you told me to mind my own business—that I was doing more harm than good."

"I'm sorry about that. Possibly you would be willing to help the authorities now."

"Too busy. And in any case all my clues were duds. Did you find out anything in America?"

"Just enough to be of value if we could get some idea of direction—enough to identify the man if we could get our hands to him."

"Professional secrets? Or are you going to tell me?"

"I came here to tell you. The man we want is about five feet nine high, dark, good features, and two scars on the body—one, two or three inches above the left wrist, and another, over the lower abdomen, probably due to an operation for appendicitis. He is between forty and fifty years of age, and of American extraction. In ability he is

above the average, and, as you already know, he is an expert on snakes."

"Yes," said Barbara. "Very useful when you've got him, but not much use for finding him in a crowd. A pity that wrist scar isn't a little lower down; even in the interests of justice we can't go about investigating people's tummies to see if they are venom experts, with criminal tendencies and an appendix scar."

The Inspector picked up his bowler hat.

"Perhaps that will help you with your clues," he said, but not very hopefully. A pawn has to be well placed to do any good.

Barbara did not show her disappointment. But, as a matter of fact, she was desperately disappointed, for she had seen Mr. Potter's left arm on more than one occasion, and he was at least six feet high.

CHAPTER VI

THE WEB

A STORM was brewing in the butler's pantry.

"It'd serve you right if you got the sack," said Bessie.

Mr. Potter raised his eyebrows.

"But why, my dear?"

"Because you are disloyal. Oh, I know perfectly well that you don't give yourself away; but, all the same, everybody downstairs knows what you think of the mistress."

"We've had all this out before," he said. "Don't let's start it all again—it's sure to lead to friction, and I don't want to be cross with you, Bessie, you're far too pretty."

He pulled out his watch and a small white card fell at her feet. She picked it up and glanced at it. "Hello!" she exclaimed. "Limehouse! And what takes you to Chinatown, Mr. Potter?"

The man snatched the ticket from her hand. For a moment his dark face was distorted with rage. Then he laughed.

"I had to see a man about some stuff at the Docks, my dear . . . that's all."

"Why get so excited about it then?"

But Mr. Potter's dignity had returned. "Come, come!" he said, "this won't do, Bessie; you must be'ave yourself in the presence of your superior officer."

The girl pouted. For some time she had been sitting on a fence. Bessie used her eyes, and recently she had realized that Mr. Potter was a man of substance. She had watched the post and knew that dividend warrants arrived at regular intervals—moreover, the capital they represented was considerable; that, also, she had ascertained. She knew that he was thinking of retiring—he had been with Aubrey Heylet for nearly twenty years and was still young enough to enjoy life . . . he must have done very well.

On the other hand she did not entirely trust the man, and his attitude towards her mistress had always rankled. Recently it had been even worse, for he had adopted a familiarity which seemed to indicate some secret understanding. There could be no doubt that Helen Heylet had changed for the worst—she was either restless and irritable or lazy and peevish. She rarely got up before midday. At times she scarcely seemed to be sane, and Bessie was finding it increasingly difficult to give satisfaction. Aubrey had given up the unequal struggle and was spending more and more time at his clubs.

It is scarcely strange that Bessie Chadnage was concerned more with the future than the present. But the wily Potter had never committed himself. That he wanted the girl was obvious, that he wanted to marry her was quite another question—at any rate, he had never asked her. There were times when she was afraid of him, and other times when she was puzzled, for he seemed to be playing a part. Or was it merely that she knew him better? When she first came to the house he had seemed to her to be quite an old man—a model family butler of the old school. Now he was terribly alive; and, at times, she regretted the concessions she had made to him. She had learnt that he generally managed

to get his own way, and others had realized that the bland Mr. Potter kept a temper.

He took her chin between his thumb and forefinger and kissed her. "There, there," he said softly, "you're a very pretty young lady, and I might do worse."

A bell rang and he looked at the indicator: "Ah! Your mistress wants to see me, Bessie."

Aubrey Heylet unlocked the cigar cupboard and counted the boxes. Ten! And he had been perfectly certain that there should have been twelve. He rang the bell.

"Potter, how many boxes of cigars should there be in this cupboard?" he asked.

"I will go and see, sir."

Domestic trifles were worrying Aubrey Heylet; for years he had left everything to Potter, now, in a sudden burst of energy, he was trying to pick up the reins again. But it was very difficult.

The butler returned with a formidable ledger. "Ten, sir," he said, and pointed to an entry in the book.

"Thanks, Potter. You are a meticulous devil, but I don't know how I should have got on without you."

The man bowed and retired, but he did not fail to note the past tense.

For some time Aubrey had relinquished all hope of regaining Helen's affection; indeed, her dislike of him seemed to be more intense than ever. A separation was the reasonable solution, but he dreaded the revival of all the old scandal—dreaded it for his own sake and also for that of his family. In any case, they could scarcely be more separated than they were, for now he very rarely saw her. Only a few of her old friends visited her, and she rarely went out except for an occasional motor drive or a shopping expedition. Of course she was ill. That was obvious.

He had asked Barbara to overhaul her. The girl had agreed and had set out on her quest full of youthful assurance; when she came down again she was flying the signals of defeat. But she would tell Aubrey nothing.

"I have spoken to her, I have done my best," she said in a dull, flat voice.

"But can nothing more be done?"

"I don't know, I must think it over."

"But, confound it all, I'm her husband."

But Barbara's nerves were on edge, and she was loyal to Helen.

"No," she said, "you're not. You can't play with that sort of thing. You abdicated long ago. I don't blame Helen a bit."

Aubrey sprang from his seat. His face was flushed and the veins stood out on his forehead. He seized her by the shoulders.

"Damn you!" he said. "It's largely your fault, you have always encouraged her . . . taken her part."

And he shook the girl.

"Leave go," she gasped. "You . . . cad!"

He dropped his hands. "I'm sorry," he apologized. "I lost my head. Everything is going wrong. There's a curse on this house."

It was the last that he had seen of Dr. Barbara Elder, and, ever since, he had been desperately ashamed of himself. . . . It was years since he had lost his temper like that. As a matter of fact, Barbara was not inclined to judge him harshly for such a spontaneous outburst, indeed she realized that it was partly her own fault. Moreover, it showed a depth of feeling for which she had never given him credit, and she was sorry for him—it was bad enough to see your wife going to the devil, without the uncomfortable feeling that you had helped to send her there.

For some time after Potter had gone Aubrey paced up and down the room. He would have to do it . . . but it would not be pleasant. It could not possibly go on—she would ruin him. And what was she spending the money on? She had never drawn on the household account to such an extent before; and now there was less to show for it than ever.

He went slowly upstairs and knocked at her door.

"Come in."

For a moment he hesitated. It was only asking for trouble in her present condition. But he was facing his responsibilities now, and nothing had been very easy so far.

He went in. "Good evening, my dear. How are you feeling?"

Helen looked at him with hard, strange eyes.

"I'm all right. Why can't you leave me alone?"

He gave an uneasy laugh. "Well . . . my dear . . . after all . . . a husband . . . naturally feels . . ."

"Don't you think, Aubrey, we might cut out all that humbug—be honest for once? You never have been my husband except in name . . . Isn't it rather late to start now?"

He bit his lip.

"Very well," he said, "I suppose I must bow to the inevitable, but you can't expect to have it both ways, Helen."

She stared at him with dull, lustreless eyes, framed in her pale face by blue rings.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that whilst you refuse me a husband's rights, you are making an excessive use of a wife's privileges—her financial privileges: you are spending a great deal of my money . . . more than I can well afford."

"So! You grudge me even that?"

"Don't be silly, dear. You know quite well that, with all my faults, I am not a mean man. But you are drawing far more on the household account than you have ever done—even when we were entertaining. I don't quite understand."

"You mean that you don't trust me. Once you thought me a murderess, now you practically accuse me of theft. It really is amusing, Aubrey; you are quite a domestic humorist . . . ha . . . ha."

To his consternation she went off into a fit of hysterical laughter—loud, uncontrollable—whilst he stood helplessly by her side. For a moment he hesitated, then he rang the bell.

"Bessie," he said, "will you see to your mistress. She is not well."

He went down to the study. What was happening? What was at the root of all this miserable business? God knows, he had given her cause enough to hate him . . . But there was surely something else too. Her white face . . . staring at him with dead eyes . . . he could see them now . . . the white face—black circles around the eyes . . . the small, contracted pupils. Ah! What did the doctors call that? "Pin-point" . . . that was it . . . "pin-point" pupils!

Mr. Rufus Jackett was obviously in a state of extreme agitation.

"I told you not to come back again," said Barbara sternly.

The eyes of Mr. Rufus Jackett bulged more than ever; a shade more and they must pop out of their sockets. He put a dirty finger to his protruding lips.

"Sh!" he whispered. "'E's done 'er in!"

"Her! You must be more explicit, Rufus."

"'Xplicit! Wot's that?"

"Tell me who she is."

"My best gal."

"Tell me all about it," said Barbara—"and take your time."

Mr. Rufus Jackett was no raconteur, but, by dint of careful cross-questions and much verbal encouragement, a more or less coherent story emerged.

On Thursday evening Rufus walked out. That is to say he met his best girl, went for a stroll, and accompanied her home. Here apparently she had played Delilah to her diminutive Samson. Obviously she was very anxious to keep a hold over the boy. One evening, when she was out of the room, he had noticed a cigar-box on the table. She never offered him cigars. He gently opened it and peeped inside—wonderful cigars they were, with red and gold bands, and the box was not full. It was the first suggestion that he was not the only male visitor—he knew very little about

girls and their ways, but she had whetted his appetite just enough to arouse his jealousy.

He took to watching the house. The girl's room was on the first floor, looking on to a small back yard; and a few feet of drainpipe, leading from the roof of a convenient outhouse, enabled him to look into the room through a gap between curtain and window-frame. Having established his observation post he set himself with dogged perseverance to watch the front door. Barbara had not misjudged the boy's bulldog tenacity when she originally selected him for her own special purposes.

For five days nothing of importance happened; then, one evening, the girl came home at nine o'clock accompanied by a man—"a torf with topper an' spats." Directly they were inside the door the boy swarmed up to his place of observation—he had an excellent view of the interior of the room. As he expected, the girl offered her visitor a cigar. He took one, bit off the end, and lit it. Then she produced a siphon, some whisky, and a glass. For some time they talked—Rufus could see their lips moving but could hear nothing. Then the girl unfastened her blouse and produced a parcel. The man opened one end and glanced inside; the result was evidently satisfactory for he took out some notes and handed them to the girl. She glanced at them, then threw them down on the table and began to talk rapidly. It was evident that they were quarrelling. The man sprang from his chair and, as he turned towards the window, for the first time Rufus obtained a good view of his face.

But the boy's descriptive powers failed him at this critical moment—the picture he drew was too fantastic to be of any real value. He could not say whether the man were tall or short, he thought he had a beard, he was sure that his face was swarthy.

But it was the eyes that had monopolized his attention—terrible eyes which shot fire, dark eyes framed in pale circles of light, eyes which seemed to eat into you. For a moment Rufus thought he was going to blast the girl as she stood

trembling before him. Then he snapped his fingers, laughed and drained his glass.

The girl lit a cigarette with trembling fingers. Then he smiled and began to talk to her, stroking her arm as though she were some animal he was trying to soothe. Evidently he was asking her to do something, for she shook her head. For some time they argued. With a shrug of the shoulders, she got up and they went out together. Rufus followed them as far as the tube station and then went home.

His jealousy was appeased—for obviously the man was no rival to her affection—but his curiosity had been aroused. From eight o'clock to eleven each evening, for a week, he maintained his vigil, but the girl neither entered nor left the house. At last his curiosity got the better of his discretion and he knocked at the door. It was opened by an elderly and disreputable woman who tried to slam it in his face. But Rufus was accustomed to that type, and his foot was firmly wedged in the gap.

Could he see the girl who lodged on the first floor?

The woman opened the door a little wider, and he stepped inside.

"What do you want with her?" A difficult question for Rufus to answer. He was beginning to invent an excuse, when the woman spoke again.

"She's dead and buried."

The girl had been run over by an omnibus in the Haymarket exactly half an hour after Rufus had seen her go into the tube station. They must have got out at Piccadilly Circus. At the inquest witnesses had stated that the girl was staggering about on the pavement in a drunken condition. A man who was with her clutched at her arm, and she fell under the wheels of a passing bus. The man, who was smartly dressed, disappeared. But, as the woman put it, there was nothing strange about that, toffs don't care to advertise their association with girls of that class. And to Rufus Jackett that was the unkindest cut of all, for he had been very proud of her friendship.

"'E kilt 'er, miss," the boy muttered in a husky whisper.

"Why do you say that?"

"'Is fice! An' she didn't drink nothink that evenin'!"
For some time Barbara pondered over the story.

"As safe as houses; nobody bothers about street accidents in these days, and it's one-way traffic at that corner in any case."

She turned to Rufus.

"I congratulate you."

"Wot abaht?"

"You have seen one of the most remarkable men in London."

"Ken yer ketch 'im, miss? 'E done my gell in."

"Perhaps. But I shouldn't worry too much about the girl—she was no good."

For a long time Dr. Barbara Elder forgot all about her patients.

In that fantastic description, she had at last obtained the clue she was seeking. For some time she had suspected that she was on the wrong track, but, thanks to Helen, Bessie Chadnage, and the Inspector, she had discovered her mistake in time.

CHAPTER VII

MISS MUFFET

If you have ever seen a rose blooming on a dung-heap, you can picture Miss Muffet. She was a patient of Dr. Barbara Elder. Her real name was Mary Maferty, but Barbara always called her Miss Muffet, though it is doubtful whether in all the weary nine years of Miss Muffet's life she had ever had more than skimmed milk. Her father was a rag and bone merchant, her mother a thriftless slut, and the habits of the family were migratory within a limited area.

Nominally the Maferty family were members of Dr. Porter's dispensary, but, as they had long since ceased to make any payments to the same, it is doubtful whether

they had any legal claim to its benefits. Dr. Porter, however, was not inclined to visit the sins of the fathers upon the children, and continued at regular intervals to attend Miss Muffet, who had a tuberculous hip-joint. She liked old Porter with his funny, finicking ways and gentle hands; but Barbara Elder she adored. The most painful manipulation was not without its element of bliss when the tall, booful lady doctor said: "I won't hurt you more than I can help, dear."

Barbara would bitterly have resented any charge of sentimentality in her medical work; she prided herself on being strong-minded and practical—but Miss Muffet knew better. Dr. Porter came to see her once a week, Dr. Elder looked in three or four times, and always, for the child, the world seemed a brighter place after she had been. It wasn't only the sweets and toys—Miss Muffet was no Mercenary Mary—it was something far more personal.

Barbara was having trouble with Mrs. Maferty. She wanted to get the child away for orthopædic and sunlight treatment, but the mother would have none of it. She didn't 'old with them there surgeons allus cuttin' people up and lookin' inside 'em. Thank Gawd she could save 'er kid from that—the pore lamb. So it had been for many visits. One day, however, Barbara found the donkey and cart of Mr. Maferty outside the front door: inside, the man was enjoying a hurried meal of bread and cheese. Once more she attempted to persuade the ignorant woman that it would be for the good of the child.

"Niver," said the woman, "niver will I allow the pore lamb to suffer at the 'ands of butchers." And she wept tears of gin and salt water.

Her husband gazed at the two women for a few moments as though he were weighing their respective merits. Then he walked up to his wife and knocked her down.

"Dry up, yer blinkin' fool," he said, "Carn't yer see as the doctor knows wot's wot?"

The woman accepted his ruling with docility. She picked herself up from the heap of rags, on to which she had

providentially fallen, and proceeded to dust her ragged skirt with the palm of her hand.

Barbara turned on the man. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself," she said.

The man spat on the ground. "Wot for?" he asked. "T'kid's moine 'smuch as 'ers—if it's 'orspital yer wants . . . 'orspital it is."

"'E allus 'ad a koind 'eart," Mrs. Maferty interposed. Her right eye was swelling, but the episode was forgotten.

Barbara applied a cold water bandage. "There," she said. "And she'll be perfectly happy. But it may take some time to get her in. There's a tremendous rush on Alton just now . . . What have you got to say about it, Miss Muffet?"

The child took Barbara's hand and squeezed it. "I'd loike ter," she whispered. A change held no terrors for Mary Maferty. Barbara produced some photographs from her bag: "That's what it's like," she said, "Sunlight, fields, and flowers. You'll get well in no time."

"Blimey! They ain't no clothes on!"

"Not many. It's the sunlight that makes them well, so they put on daisy chains instead."

"Wot's that?" asked the child as she placed a finger on the photograph.

"A special jacket to make her back straight. The same sort of thing as this"—she touched the long splint the child was wearing. "They have to wear them at first, then they leave them off when Mr. Sunshine has made them well."

The child's eyes danced with joy. "My! Won't it be foine!"

Barbara bathed the wounds around the diseased joint and applied fresh dressings.

"Does nurse come every day?" she asked.

"Yus," said the woman. "Not as I 'olds with 'er, she makes a deal of work."

Barbara regarded the derelict couple sternly.

"Then you both agree to the child going to Alton if I can get her in?"

"Yus," said the man, and the woman gave a grunt as his elbow forcibly impinged on her ribs. "'Ow soon?"

"Probably in a month or two."

The woman gazed at her with hostile, watery eyes, as she went out; but the man gave her a twisted smile.

"Thank ye, miss," he said.

Dr. Porter engulfed half a sausage. His meals from force of circumstances had degenerated into a process of forcible feeding against time. Doctors are too busy with other people's digestions to pay much attention to their own.

"Yes," he said, "old Skelinski no better, of course! Still getting benefit from that iodine mixture? Good!"

He made a rapid entry in his note-book, and the other half-sausage disappeared.

"That Jewess, next door. What's her name? Cora . . . something. How's she doing?"

"Too fat! Of course she's too fat . . . they all are. But it doesn't prevent them from having children, and I nearly lost her last time . . . My God, it was like a shambles!"

"Well, she's all right again now. She'll probably have another soon."

Barbara watched the rapid disappearance of a slice of toast and some marmalade.

"I think you ought to see Mary Maferty two or three times a week until they can take her at Alton."

Dr. Porter grunted. He had no sentiment, but Mary Maferty went down for two visits a week.

"I'll see her to-day. Put her down for Tuesday," said Barbara. On the whole she was glad to have come to the end of her first locum. Old Porter had returned from his enforced holiday with a thankful heart.

"It takes weeks to recover from a holiday, my dear," he said. "And, after all, what is a holiday? Sleep, eat, newspaper, walk, eat, doze, stroll, eat, walk, eat, bridge,

sleep—terrible! Devastating for body and soul. I suppose it's largely habit, but I miss my work—for years I was too busy to think of anything else, now I don't want to."

Barbara pictured the valley of dry bones thus presented to her, and her soul revolted. Surely life held something better than this slavish adherence to a dull routine!

"Have you never wanted to break free?" she asked.

The question surprised him. "Free! I am free. Once, for a short time, I was a slave . . . of fear—fear of women—I wouldn't have travelled alone in a railway carriage with one for a small fortune. If one got in, I got out. I feared them and that is probably why I have advocated their claims for equality. In a way it was natural, for a woman accused me of performing an illegal operation on her daughter. She demanded compensation but, of course, it was just an ordinary case of blackmail. There was some blackguard in the background—a man with brains—and I nearly lost my head. It frightened me. Thank God, I faced it in the end and gave her in charge. . . . She got two years, but everybody knew she was only a pawn in the game. They never caught the man."

"Did they ever find out anything more?"

"No. Several doctors were victimized in a similar way; some of them paid up rather than face the publicity of it all. Then gradually it stopped."

"Perhaps he found something more profitable to do—people with more money . . ."

But Dr. Porter was not listening, for the moment his visiting list was monopolizing his attention.

"Fairly brisk!" he said, as he closed the book.

"Yes, there isn't much spare time."

In the afternoon Barbara paid her farewell visit to Miss Muffet. She took some sweets and a mechanical toy, but Mary Maferty was not so easily appeased—she was going to lose her lady doctor and old Dr. Porter did not appeal to her as an adequate substitute.

"But, Muffet dear, it'll only be the same as it was before I came."

The little girl looked at her with solemn eyes.

"I don't see as 'ow it kin . . . things can't ever be the same agin."

"Look here. If you ever need me really badly and send for me, I'll come."

"Y'ain't kiddin', miss?"

"No, I'll come."

"Give over, yer young limb," said Mrs. Maferty, "the lidy's got sumat else to fink of than you."

But Miss Muffet was not disturbed; she knew Barbara Elder.

CHAPTER VIII

THE VENERABLE ARCHDEACON

BARBARA returned to a home of singular peace and contentment, for her father had been made Archdeacon. He was now the Venerable Archdeacon Elder, and with the achievement of his ambition had come a kindliness, a benevolence, a toleration which he had never shown before. For some time Barbara contemplated this strange phenomenon with surprise not unmixed with suspicion. Could the leopard change his spots? Then her medical instinct came to her aid and she realized that, with all his bumptious assurance and dogmatism, her father was really a shy man suffering from that mysterious complaint—an inferiority complex. His dignity as a simple vicar had been jealously guarded—always on the defensive, on the alert for any suggestion of a slight. Now, in the realization of merit recognized, of an ambition fulfilled, he beamed on the world at large and his family in particular.

For Kate it was ample reward for years of patient endurance; she had always loved him and now she could respect him as well.

It had always been her custom to get up and make him an early cup of tea. One morning he drowsily opened one eye and said:

"You are very good, my dear, self-sacrifice seems to have become rather a feminine monopoly."

"Nonsense," she laughed. "It's merely that women sacrifice in snippets and men in chunks. The snippets blow all over the place, and one can't help seeing them."

The kettle began to sing softly and the Venerable Archdeacon dropped into a blissful doze. And he dreamt that he was standing before a great white throne with a chunk of wood in his arms. And suddenly there was the sound of music—sackbuts, psalteries, dulcimers, and all kinds of music—and up the marble staircase which led to the throne came Kate, at the head of a vast army of splinters. Steadily they climbed the great marble staircase—big splinters and little splinters, fat splinters and thin splinters, tall splinters and short splinters . . . a glorious army. And as he watched them come his chunk of wood grew heavier and heavier . . .

"Your tea, dear," said Kate.

"Dear me," he exclaimed. "I must have been dreaming."

And the Venerable Archdeacon took his wife in his arms and kissed her with an ardour that belied his titular dignity.

Barbara was late for breakfast. She was sorry about it, for she did not wish to resume her role as an apple of discord, and her father was very particular about punctuality at meals—breakfast had never been allowed to be an exception for it was preceded by family prayers.

"Sorry, Pater," she said.

"All right, my dear, no recriminations to-day. You've earned a good night's rest, and I should be the last to grudge it you for I hardly know what a night-bell sounds like."

Barbara enjoyed her breakfast. That was decent of him! Everything was different—even the old, familiar, mahogany furniture seemed to twinkle with fun and good humour. There was an egg—it had been left for her. She peeled off the shell and lowered it carefully on to the bacon, where it lay with the helpless wobble characteristic of its naked state. She took a knife and put it out of its misery.

The Archdeacon retired to his study.

"You are just back in time, dear," said Kate. "Tomorrow is a great day—the opening of the new Hall for the Young People's Guild. Henry Judson gave the last two hundred pounds, and the work was completed a week ago."

"What is the programme?"

"Opening ceremony at 7.30, then a short concert and then dancing. The young people always like that, and the floor is excellent."

"You are feeding them, I suppose."

"Just light refreshments after the concert—lemonade, sandwiches and cakes."

"Quite festive for a parochial function! Who is going to kick off—open the show?"

"Lady Dalton, the Member's wife."

"She's a good sort."

Barbara helped herself to some marmalade. It was quite like old times, with a difference.

"You'll come, Babs?"

"Who are talking?"

"Only Lady Dalton, your father, and Henry Judson."

"Henry Judson! Yes, I should like to be there—and I haven't heard Pater since he became a gaitered dignitary. Those gaiters must be terrible things to live up to, mum. It's a pity . . . rather"—she pulled up the hem of her mother's skirt—"Yes. They'd certainly look better on your legs, dear. His are rather . . . all-overish. Aren't they?"

"Babs, you mustn't make fun of him. He's been ever so good lately."

The girl kissed her.

"Righto!" she said.

The Venerable Archdeacon Elder was justifiably proud of his new hall. It had cost a large sum of money which had not been too easy to collect; indeed, without Judson's assistance, it would have been practically impossible. Now, the building was completed and there was no debt. There

was a large central hall with a platform, suitable for concerts, plays or dances: leading out of it were smaller rooms for billiards, gymnastics and other youthful amusements.

It was certainly an asset to the parish, and Parker, the senior curate, was excellent with young people, and had enrolled a large number of members for the Guild.

It was to be a centre where young people of both sexes could meet and get to know one another under favourable moral and physical conditions.

"An excellent idea," the Archdeacon had said, when Parker outlined the scheme to his superior. "Excellent! I have always felt the need for some such . . . er . . . organization." Then he blinked and coughed uneasily—for his conscience was active, and hitherto this aspect of juvenile work had never occurred to him.

The hall was well filled for the opening. That inevitable separation between the benefactors and the recipients supplied the requisite atmosphere for such a function.

"So naice to be able to help the dear young people!" It is a dry rot that clings to many charities, reminiscent of the days when ladies went slumming as a cure for boredom, and viewed the objects of their benevolence through tortoiseshell lorgnettes, with much the same feeling of curiosity that an entomologist views some new species of flea down a microscope.

True, those days are passing, but to some degree the opening of St. Jude's Hall suffered from the same spirit. The platform and front rows were reserved for those who had subscribed, and they did not mix. Barbara was conscious of this atmosphere directly she entered the Hall. Henry Judson was chatting to the leader of the Guild, and Mr. Parker was the centre of a group of smartly-dressed ladies; but most of the élite kept themselves severely aloof. It would have been so much easier if it had been a club for working men, for costers or tramps. But these young people were most emphatically bourgeoisie—tradesmen, shop-girls and what not—and as such needed to be kept in their proper places.

Judson saw Barbara come in, and greeted her with cordiality:

"It's good to see you back again, Dr. Barbara."

"I'm glad to be back."

"For long?" he asked.

She shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know. It all depends."

"Depends on what?"

"Ah," she said, "that's just what I don't know."

The Archdeacon entered with Lady Dalton and they moved up towards the platform.

The speeches were dull. It would have been contrary to all precedent had they been anything else. The Archdeacon scratched Lady Dalton's back and Lady Dalton scratched Henry Judson's—the important part he had played in the activities of the Church; his interest in young people—clubs for young people especially . . . not only clubs such as she had the privilege of opening to-night, but clubs designed to encourage young people to see the world, to travel in comfort and meet the right sort of people. . . . She was getting in a tangle, the sentence wouldn't round itself off properly.

Henry Judson smiled and looked down the long hall, over the heads of a bored audience, at the handsome clock placed over the main entrance. It had been his final gift to the club . . . and Lady Dalton had already exceeded her time by five minutes. Barbara followed his eyes, and she too regarded the clock with interest, but not with greater interest than she had listened to certain portions of the lady's speech.

The Archdeacon devoted five minutes to handing verbal bouquets to all and sundry. Henry Judson said very little and said it very well. The concert was a great success, as such concerts always are—if one may judge by the volume of applause. The Archdeacon and his satellites led the clapping with a hearty goodwill, and total disregard of merit, which permitted no discrimination of favouritism. Back-scratching was the recognized order of the day.

The members of the Guild made short work of the light refreshments, whilst the élite—having warmed to their task—looked on with genial toleration. Henry Judson was here, there and everywhere—the life and soul of the party. Barbara caught him near the platform.

"What time does the dancing begin, Mr. Judson?"

He took out his watch.

"I should think they will be ready in about ten minutes."

She glanced at his watch.

"You are slow by the new clock," she said.

He looked down the room. "Yes," he agreed, "two minutes slow. You are very meticulous to-day."

She laughed and showed him her wrist-watch. "Yes. Mine has lost ten minutes in four days and I've just had it cleaned—fifteen bob . . . they might, at least, regulate it properly . . . Hallo, Peter!"

She turned to greet the new arrival. "How late you are!"

"Still lectures," he urged. "It's impossible to miss one . . . puts the whole course out."

"Never mind, you are just in time for the dancing."

He looked at her. "What's the matter, Babs? It's no good trying to deny it . . . something has excited you to-night. . . . You are all of a dither."

"The prospect of a dance with you, dear boy, is enough to account for any undue elation I may betray. You weren't very nice to me the last time we met, and, naturally, I am hoping for something better this evening. Have you pictured the plight of my tumultuous heart since you parted with me thus coldly on the paternal doorstep, after consuming most of my available substance in riotous living? Oh, Peter!"

"It was a glorious evening, Babs, and I *was* duly grateful."

"But, with praiseworthy self-control, you concealed the fact from me! And how is Miss Shields?"

"Very efficient! So efficient that I feel pretty sure that one day she will bring it off."

"What?"

"Persuade Haynes to marry her. She's been at it for

years; he needs a good deal of playing, but she's getting him into shallow water now."

"Peter, I love . . ."

"Yes!" he said.

"I love dancing."

His face fell. "Oh! . . . Then let's."

There was no doubt in Barbara Elder's mind that the evening was proving a success. Peter danced very nicely, and he held his partner with a masterly efficiency which indicated proprietary rights: the clasp of his hand was eloquent of the renewal of past understandings. Barbara once more felt that Peter wanted her, and that he wanted her badly. It was scarcely playing the game for, even now, she had not made up her mind, with regard to fundamentals—or, to be more exact, with regard to those things which Peter regarded as fundamentals.

"Peter, look!" she exclaimed.

And truly it was worth looking at. The Archdeacon was dancing a quick foxtrot with Lady Dalton. The lady's face in itself was a study—a study in resigned apprehension: but the Archdeacon beamed with genial satisfaction. He had never danced before, but anyone could do this . . . all that fuss about dancing lessons! Pooh! "Tum, tum; tum, tum; tum, te, tum te, tum."

With feet widespread and knees well bent, he strutted up and down the room in perfect time with the music, pushing his luckless partner in front of him as though she were a perambulator.

"Pater *is* coming on," said Barbara.

"My God!" said Peter. "If he lands one, her ladyship will be crippled for life."

But the Archdeacon did not land one, for Lady Dalton being the wife of a Member of Parliament, had learnt how to look after herself.

"Wonderful!" she said, as her panting and perspiring partner led her from the fray. "My dear Archdeacon, you are a born dancer—it seems impossible that this is your first attempt."

But George Elder did not get on so well with his wife. "Really, Kate," he said, after several attempts at agreement, "can't you go a little quicker? I don't believe you are keeping time."

Kate smiled, for she had once been an excellent dancer, and George should never have attempted a valse.

Henry Judson watched the fun with great contentment—all this was largely due to his efforts. Barbara joined him, and took a vacant seat by his side.

"Don't you dance, Mr. Judson?"

He pointed to his tinted glasses. "No," he said, "any active exercise is prohibited, and this looks to me a very strenuous amusement for anyone past middle-age. Also I should never guide my partner, I guess I'd simply mow the enemy down. No, Dr. Barbara, I want people to think well of me to-night and we have no first-aid station on the premises."

"Pater seems to have no anxieties on that score."

"No. A wonderful man! We are proud to have such a vicar—so genial and whole-hearted. He has done much to reconcile me to my disability."

"What is the trouble? Can nothing more be done?"

He shook his head. "Double detachment of retina or something of that sort. Critchett told me nothing more could be done fifteen years ago. It was like a full stop—one had to begin all over again."

"I'm sorry," she said. "Even specialists cannot do everything."

"Well, I mustn't complain, for he left me enough to carry on with; at one time he thought I should be totally blind."

"Yes, he didn't do badly for a double detachment."

The Archdeacon was on the platform; dancing had ceased.

"We will all join in singing the Doxology," he said.

CHAPTER IX

INSPECTOR ROSE LANDS A FISH

THEY were having lunch. Barbara was fully occupied with the business in hand and serenely unconscious of the curiosity of her parents. Her father cleared his throat.

"Is it true, my dear, that Inspector Rose of Scotland Yard came to see you here this morning?"

"Yes, I asked him to come." She helped herself to a sweet. "I love your jellies, mum. In these days of sophisticated, bottled, tinned, and packeted foods, your orange jelly is a real treat."

Her Venerable parent regarded her over his glasses. She was obviously not in a communicative mood and he was intensely curious.

"Nothing serious, I hope."

"Not for you, Pater. You are quite safe. I don't think your show last night transgressed even the least of the benevolent restrictions of our dear friend DORA. Or did you, by any chance, sell a cake to a hungry boy scout after eight o'clock?"

But the Reverend George Elder did not like evasions, and Barbara changed her tone.

"Sorry, Pater. I'd tell you if I could—for the moment I am not at liberty. You'll hear soon enough. It doesn't affect any of us so there is no need for you to worry."

"You seemed to be getting on very well with Peter, last night," said Kate diplomatically.

Barbara became thoughtful. Peter and Inspector Rose were incompatibles—the one stood for domesticity and submission, he would accept nothing less; the other represented freedom of thought, and action, excitement, adventure, observation, deduction, and possibly fame.

If she could only get that man!

"I should rather like Peter for a son-in-law," said Kate.

Barbara smiled. "I'm afraid that you have an acquisitive

temperament, Mum; but I agree that he would not disgrace the family. As a husband . . . he would certainly be tolerable, and possibly something more."

Kate sighed. "I suppose you are in earnest, dear, but it's very difficult to understand the modern attitude towards marriage. The great idea seems to be to eliminate any idea of home—the ideal of our forefathers has become the folly of to-day. I suppose Patti would have been hissed by the present generation for singing 'Home, sweet home'."

"Don't worry, little mother, it's only a passing phase, and I'm not sure that we really mean it. A little elementary physiology will soon disillusion a girl on the question of sex equality—and that is the parrot-cry at the root of all the trouble."

It is possible that the Venerable Archdeacon would have been even more curious could he have heard a conversation which took place between Inspector Rose and his colleague Bucket that same evening.

"Well," said Bucket, "you seem to be on to something at last."

The fat man chuckled. "I told you she was a good 'un."

"You've got to prove your case first."

"Prove it! He was followed yesterday. I've got the whole gang just here." He placed a spatulate thumb over an ink-spot on the deal table. "Just here; and there will be plenty more evidence when we've got him. One of those Chinks has a down on him. There are papers, too, with his signature. We've traced all his banking accounts, and he's worth thousands in cash and securities—pretty good pay for a butler! Eh?"

"And Dr. Elder put you on the track?"

"Yes, she got wind of his visits down East, and of his investments. She knows other things too."

"Well, Bert, I congratulate you. You're one of the lucky ones."

The other scratched his head dubiously. "Yes . . . I suppose so . . . but I wish . . . well, it's no good wishing."

"It takes a damned lot to satisfy some people," said Inspector Bucket. "But you are up to something. What's your game?"

The fat man leant across the table and whispered.

Bucket rubbed his hands. "I always said you were a deep 'un, Bert, for all yer fat. But, if anything . . . unfortunate . . . should happen, it'd be precious near manslaughter, as far as you are concerned."

"I must chance that."

"You're a cold-blooded old reprobate, but I'm blessed if I see why you should have all the fun whilst I'm chained to this infernal office."

"Fun! It's not much fun if one fails."

"No," said Bucket, "they'll enlarge the lost property office, and put you in charge of it."

Mr. Potter looked out of the dining-room window. A man was standing on the opposite pavement talking to the postman. There was nothing about him to excite either interest or alarm; he was wearing a blue serge suit and a soft grey felt hat, his boots were square-toed and very shiny. Mr. Potter drew back behind the thick velvet curtain and watched the man. It might have been chance that he was there this morning, or coincidence that he was there yesterday as well; but, as a matter of fact, it was the third day that Mr. Potter had seen him, and each day—except for his boots—he had been dressed differently. That was significant.

The butler fastened back the curtains, tidied the mantel-piece, arranged the table-centre and went out of the room. On the stairs he encountered Bessie Chadnage.

"Mornin', Bessie," he said.

The girl flushed. "Good morning, Mr. Potter." And she hurried past him.

So! She *was* trying to avoid him. He had thought so for two or three days, now he knew. And she was frightened. Mr. Potter went up to his room and locked the door—he did not want to be interrupted, he must think.

Of course, there might be nothing in it, but it was always well to be on the safe side. He pulled out a large trunk, unlocked it, took out some papers and glanced through them. Two or three he placed in his pocket-book. The box was of tough fibre with a strong linen lining. Very carefully he cut through the lining in one corner, and inserted the remaining documents between the linen and the fibre. Then he took a needle and neatly repaired the damage. He turned out the contents of his pockets on to the bed and carefully scrutinized each article in turn, sorting them into two heaps. The smaller he placed in the fireplace and burnt. Then he collected the ashes, threw them out of the window and tidied up the hearth.

He handled the decanter at lunch-time with that pious devotion which marks the perfect butler. He presided with his usual urbanity over the staff-board and his appetite was not impaired. At the conclusion he turned to Bessie:

"Can you spare me a few minutes?" he asked casually.

Without a word she followed him. How could she do anything else, asked like that before all the others? He gently closed the pantry door, and softly turned the key in the lock.

The girl looked at him with startled eyes. "Don't lock it," she said.

He took her by the arm and forced her into a chair. "If you make a sound, I'll kill you. Now," he said, "you've been spying and talking to someone. Who is it? Out with it."

The girl held up her hand as though to ward off a blow. "Don't," she urged. "Don't look at me like that, Mr. Potter. I didn't mean any 'arm, but she kept asking questions—medical questions—about the mistress."

"And you told her?"

"Nothing important—just about that ticket, and that you were on better terms with the mistress . . ."

"Yes. Go on."

"And that you had made your pile and were going to retire soon."

"You damned little fool! And who was going to share it all?"

He took the key out of his pocket and unlocked the door.

"You can go," he said. "But if you ever dare to talk about my affairs again I'll kill you, if I swing for it."

After the girl had gone Mr. Potter reviewed the situation—the bits of the puzzle were coming together. It was certain that Dr. Barbara Elder suspected something and had communicated with the police—the man in the shiny boots proved that. But had she any real evidence—any proofs which could be produced in court? If not, he was perfectly safe, they could not possibly take any action on what that chattering little fool had given away. But was she such a fool after all? Had she been spying on him all the time? If so it completely altered the position. At any rate it would be well to have some ready money available—a few hundreds in case of accidents.

He went up to the dining-room and surveyed the street. It was deserted except for a Harrod's delivery van three or four houses away.

Half an hour later Mr. Potter was on his way to the Bank. Twice he turned sharply round and retraced his steps, but nobody was following him. He would only just be in time. Fortunately the chief cashier knew him quite well so there would be no difficulty about the cheque.

The cashier glanced at it. "Four hundred pounds," he said. "Oh, Mr. Potter, the manager wanted to see you about those Chinese Bonds you bought last week. Can you spare a moment?"

He went into the manager's office.

"He'll be back in a few minutes. Can you wait?"

Mr. Potter nodded and took a seat. They had always been helpful to him at this Bank, better than at any of the others; and the manager was very sound on investments.

The manager came into the outer office. "Now, Mr. Potter," he said. "I shan't keep you long."

He held open the door and Mr. Potter walked into the

arms of Inspector Rose and the man with the shiny boots.

"I have a warrant for your arrest, James Potter," said the Inspector.

The news reached Aubrey Heylet at tea-time. Of course, there must be some mistake, Potter had been a family institution since the old Harrow days. For years Aubrey had trusted him implicitly . . . recently . . . of course . . . But then everything had been going wrong recently! He himself was haunted by vain regrets; when he slept they took the form of unpleasant dreams, and when he woke their spectral forms ushered in the hopeless dawn. And now . . . Potter!

He hurried down to the police-station. Something must be done about it . . . bail . . . legal assistance.

Two hours later he was home again. Two hours! It might have been two years. There was no hope now—his name . . . his wife's reputation would be dragged into court to support the prosecution; and, in the public eye, he must play a sorry part. The evidence he would be called upon to give would convict him of culpable folly and neglect, and for Helen . . . it would be far worse. He had been blind not to appreciate what was going on. Or had he deliberately shut his eyes to anything which might disturb his slothful serenity? Certain vague misgivings had troubled him lately, but the established habit of years had been too strong for him.

Time to dress for dinner. What a mockery it all was! To sit in solitary state through the prescribed menu. He would not even have the moral support of Potter now, and the new parlourmaid got on his nerves.

He opened the door and found himself face to face with Bessie Chadnage.

"I was coming for you, sir," the girl panted. "The mistress!"

"Yes," he said. "What is the matter?"

"I told her about Mr. Potter—she 'ad been wanting to

see him all the afternoon—then I went downstairs. When I came back the door was locked . . . I've knocked and knocked, and she doesn't answer. It's all quiet."

Aubrey Heylet dashed up the stairs and knocked at his wife's door.

"Helen! Helen!" he called. But there was no reply. He shook the door but the lock was a strong one. Then he went back a few steps and hurled his whole weight against the panels, but they refused to yield. He fetched a massive poker from his room, and after five frenzied minutes, succeeded in bursting the lock.

The girl looked through the door and shrieked. Helen Heylet, wrapped in a light blue dressing-gown, was stretched out on the heavy pile carpet.

Aubrey bent over the body. "It's all right, Bessie, she's not dead . . . she's . . . drunk!"

He picked up the empty brandy bottle and placed it on the dressing-table between the eau de Cologne and face powder.

"Help me to get her into bed," he said.

The man in the moon witnessed a comedy that night. But, lacking humour, he wept over it, and the barometer went back to "rain".

For a long time the oblong patch of window glowed with a steady but subdued light, for the blind was down. Presently it grew brighter, for the blind had been pulled up. The window was thrown open, and suddenly all was dark, except where the moonlight shone upon the bed. For some time the man turned restlessly—but there was nothing wrong with the bed, it had box springs, soft linen sheets and down pillows. And the man was wearing silk pyjamas, but even that did not satisfy him.

He got out of bed, unlocked a drawer in the wardrobe, and took out a pistol. He made sure that it was properly loaded. It was quite a small weapon, almost a toy . . . he balanced it delicately in his right hand. There was a sheet of note-paper on an inlaid mahogany writing-table. He placed the

pistol on a chair, sat down, and wrote a short letter. Then he picked up the pistol again and got back into bed.

The man in the moon watched his movements with interest.

Undecided, he glanced around the room, he took up a box of cigars from the table beside the bed and sniffed at them; he gazed out of the window straight at the moon. Then he got out of bed and went to the open window—he was doing something—doing it feverishly, impatiently—with the pistol. There was a clump of laurels, stunted and covered with soot, just below the window. Something rattled like hail amongst the broad leaves.

Aubrey Heylet had changed his mind again.

CHAPTER X

A SENSE OF DIRECTION

RODERICK HAYNES should certainly have settled down by Tuesday; but he was wearing a light tweed suit; a gay button-hole, and a grey silk tie. He read the letter through; he repeated the performance with knitted brow; he gave it up.

"Extraordinary!" he muttered. "I can't concentrate to-day."

He was pacing up and down the room when Peter came in.

"Hang this Potter case!" the junior partner exclaimed. "It's giving the deuce of a lot of trouble."

"We're not interested in Potter's defence," Haynes snapped.

"No, but Aubrey Heylet has asked me to watch the case for him, and I'm blessed if I can see how we are going to prevent the defence from giving him a very poor time—what with his folly and Helen's . . . weakness. If we were in their place we should simply jump at it—My client, gentlemen, may have to plead guilty to the various charges brought against him, but I submit that there are extenuating circumstances. There is a degree of culpability which may

transcend the actual commission of a crime—that which attaches to those who by deliberate intent or by wilful neglect and apathy have led to its commission. I submit, gentlemen, that James Potter is merely a tool in the hands of others—of others, moreover, who could claim his obedience and willing service.”

“Oh, shut up, Peter! Any fool can see that side. After all, we are lawyers, not advocates, and it doesn’t excuse his household delinquencies.”

“No, but that’s quite a small part of the charge against him.”

“Oh, well!” He gazed guiltily at the door. “I say, Peter, how *do* you persuade the ball to stop dead on the greens? You remember . . . the twelfth and sixteenth . . . on Saturday.”

Peter glanced around the room.

“Come well down on to the ball, so as to give it back spin. Look.”

He picked up an umbrella. “Now. Keep the left arm very stiff—just like that. . . . Try.”

“No, no! Much too flabby . . . quite a short swing . . . and very compact.”

“Splendid! That’s just right. Now . . . steady.”

There was a tap at the door, and Miss Shields entered, just in time to see the junior partner apparently embracing his chief, who was waving an umbrella, with painful concentration, in the air.

Peter did not feel equal to the situation. He basely deserted his partner and fled.

Haynes gazed in confusion at the stockings of Miss Joanna Shields—there could be no doubt that they were real silk . . . none of your vegetable makeshifts—and there was something very attractive about the way the rounded calf tapered towards the trim ankle.

“Will you sign the letters now?”

His glance shifted slowly, travelling up the slim lines of her figure, until it reached the lips.

They were set. Trouble ahead! . . . No . . . there

was a quiver . . . he looked into her grey eyes . . . they were smiling.

"I suppose it'll mean another rise," he said.

He went up to the girl and put his arm around her waist. She did not object.

"Look here, Jo dear, it's terribly expensive that way. Will you marry me?"

The stern little face relaxed. A dimple appeared at the left-hand corner of the mouth.

"Of course I will," she said. "I've loved you for quite a long time. I wondered when you would propose to me."

And Joanna was gathered into the ample folds of his festive waistcoat; she could not feel the heart that beat for her alone, but she took it on trust, for she knew that he was a man of his word.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed. "And what shall I do for a secretary now? It's almost as inconvenient as marrying one's cook."

"You may have worse things than that to put up with."

He kissed her . . . "Ah," he said, "I don't want that one back."

"No," she whispered. "You do it rather well . . . for a bachelor. You'll have to teach me golf, so that I can understand your funny language."

"All right," he laughed. "Fore! . . . That means I am going to do it again."

He kissed her on the lips, and then on the nape of the neck, just below two little brown curls.

"That's not fair!" said Joanna. "You didn't say fore . . . and aft."

He looked at her sternly, than at the clock.

"God bless my soul, there's a great deal of work to do. I'll sign those letters, Miss Shields."

"Yes, sir," said Joanna meekly. And she tenderly replaced the umbrella in its stand.

When Peter returned to his rooms that evening he found Barbara waiting for him.

"I believe I've got him," she said, and proceeded to justify her statement.

"Good heavens! What put on the track?"

Barbara took up a sheet of note-paper and wrote diligently for five minutes, with short intervals for reflection.

"Purely circumstantial evidence, my dear Watson; but there it is, plainly set out in black and white."

Peter ran his finger down the paper.

"Quite simple," he said. "For a moment I thought you had done something clever."

"As you can see, I have proved absolutely nothing, but everything is pointing the same way. The evidence may be merely circumstantial, but it is also cumulative. The crucial test remains. As Professor Gerstein is so fond of pointing out, the police are very efficient—they will probably apply this final test, and reap the credit for a most important piece of work."

"Do you want the credit?"

"No. I'd like to catch the man, but anybody is welcome to the carcass. Credit is a funny thing—it often goes to somebody who doesn't deserve it, or even to a crook who has filched it from somebody else's pocket. Staff officers, at the base, get the credit for winning battles; financiers reap the profits of an invention; doctors pat themselves on the back when the patient recovers."

"My dear Babs, why so cynical?"

"Oh, I don't know . . . I suppose I'm rattled . . . developing nerves!"

Peter laughed. "My dear, it is the last thing anyone would accuse you of possessing, if you mean nervousness. Had you used the singular, I might have been inclined to agree with you."

"But it's true, Peter. I've a feeling that I am being followed—delusions are a sure sign of insanity. The other day when I went to see Miss Muffet, I kept looking round, there seemed to be someone dogging my footsteps—I felt perfectly sure of it. Then there was that episode in the Piccadilly Tube. I was standing on the platform in a crowd,

when somebody blundered into me from behind, just as the train was coming into the station—a man caught my arm just in time or I should have been on the line.”

Peter looked scared. “I expect it was only an accident.”

“I thought so too, but the same thing happened to me at Blackfriars yesterday. I’m not travelling by Underground just for a bit. Little things like that get on one’s nerves.”

“Why don’t you tell the police?”

“Because they would probably laugh at me. You see, they don’t know how close I am; and I have a feeling that any false step now would spoil everything.”

“Well, for goodness’ sake, take care. You are rather important to me, Babs. And, after all, some day you will belong to me.”

She smiled at him.

“Poor old Peter! You are rather possessive in your marriage views, aren’t you? One might almost call you Oriental. I expect you favour yashmaks, the purdah and all that.”

“Oh, Babs. That’s unkind!”

“But you *are* rather autocratic, aren’t you? ‘*Aut Cæsar aut nullus.*’”

“You are everything to me, dear. And I am merely your most humble slave.”

“Provided,” said Barbara.

“Yes, provided,” said Peter.

“And that’s just what makes it so difficult. You know, Peter, I’ve brought a good number of them into the world—it’s a lovely thing . . . theoretically . . . but practically . . . it’s rather primitive.”

She shrugged her shoulders. “Come for a stroll, old thing.”

As they passed the new Hall on the way home there were lights in the side room, and they could hear laughter and the click of billiard balls.

“Come in for a minute, Peter. The large hall is empty and I want you to decide something for me—quite a simple point, but I want to be absolutely certain about it.”

Wondering, he followed her. She switched on all the lights and the hall was brilliantly illuminated. There was a chair at the back of the platform; she pushed it forward.

"Sit down," she said, and tapped the seat.

She went behind him and placed a finger at the outer angle of each eye and pressed gently.

"What is the time by that clock?" she asked.

"If you would leave my eyes alone perhaps I could tell you."

"What can you see?"

"Everything is fairly plain except the clock. It is rather small for the size of the hall."

"Exactly what I thought," said Barbara.

"Look here, old thing, is this a game? What are you trying to find out?"

"Nothing much. It's merely a study in human fallibility—the fallibility of genius. They all make mistakes sooner or later."

"You are very cryptic."

"My dear boy, go home and add to your slip of paper—the clock in the Church Hall requires very good eyes to tell the time from the platform."

Peter looked troubled. "You are playing a dangerous game, Babs. Why don't you tell the police all that you know, and chuck it?"

"It's impossible, my dear. So far there is plenty of evidence, but absolutely no proof. I am getting what Inspector Rose would call a sense of direction—a few more days and I think we shall get there. The Underground episodes, if they are not mere chance, seem to indicate that I am on the right track, and the man knows it. In any case, I am absolutely certain that somebody is watching me."

A magnificent autumn gave promise of an abundant harvest. Providence had intervened and had banished Barbara Elder from the preoccupations of town life to the restful seclusion of the country. "The best laid schemes

of mice and men gang aft agley," but the doctor called it acute gastro-enteritis. Certainly Barbara was very sick for a day or two, and her medical adviser was puzzled and alarmed.

"What has she eaten that the others have not had?" he asked Kate. But Kate could not help him.

"Anyhow, it's a food-poisoning of some sort," said the busy man, as he stood on the doorstep. Diseases must be pinned down, and have a label attached—if only in case of the need for a death certificate.

Barbara said nothing—she was feeling very ill, and to suggest the metallic poisons would have been to show her hand at a moment when she was especially anxious to keep it concealed. But the strain was telling, and she realized that something would have to be done to relieve it—it was like waiting at the crater of Vesuvius for a chance to get a good snap-shot.

For a week she was confined to bed. When her strength began to return she decided to go into the country and to keep her destination secret; nobody—not even Kate—was to know where she was going.

One night she disappeared. Kate, who alone knew the hour of departure, noted with surprise that she chose to go by way of the small back garden and the gate in the wall, in preference to the more conventional front door. But Barbara had always done unexpected things, since the day when she appeared in the world the wrong way up; and Kate had developed a habit of accepting any fresh eccentricity with resignation and a confidence that there was nothing fortuitous about her daughter's actions.

It happened that the man in the street knew nothing about that garden door—indeed, who would have expected a garden with a back entrance behind that mass of brickwork?

Of necessity Barbara was travelling with little luggage; but in the matter of clothing women are privileged mortals. Four or five frocks occupy the space of one suit, and lingerie has been specially designed by a kindly providence to fill

up the chinks. Barbara slipped quietly through the gate and looked to left and right. It was a cul-de-sac, and it was deserted. She managed to pick up a belated taxi-cab and drove to King's Cross. She had two hours to wait for a train, so she dozed in a dark corner of the waiting-room. A few sleepy individuals were at the booking office—she took a ticket to Harrogate; it was best to be on the safe side.

At Peterboro' she got out and proceeded across country, with many changes, to Bacle. At the last change she had been the only person to board the train—she was sure of that. Now she could rest in peace until the time came for the final coup.

The sun was high in the sky, the corn was ripening in the broad fields, the small homesteads and modest farm-houses invited her to their peaceful solitude. And she had not the faintest idea where she was going to stay. Bacle had been her choice because once, many years ago, they had had at the vicarage a servant who came from Bacle—a girl slow of speech and deliberate of action. Barbara felt that it must be a restful spot, or such a type could never have survived.

CHAPTER XI

HOCKING'S FARM

OUTSIDE the station she turned down the road leading to the village, a small, winding road spanned by the railway bridge. A few cottages clustered around the inevitable Post Office, which seemed to form the nucleus of the place. It was a neat little shop with catholic interests, a thatched roof, and a small bell over the door which tinkled feebly as Barbara entered. Here could be bought anything from postage stamps to shrimp paste, from fly-papers to cotton night-gowns. Brushes were hanging from the raftered ceiling, soap was stacked upon the counter, bottles of highly-coloured sweets stood shoulder to shoulder on a wooden

shelf, whilst flannel petticoats and woollen under-garments flanked the window display.

It was like a gipsy van which had taken root in a congenial soil.

Barbara purchased a small piece of lace for sixpence halfpenny.

"Are there any apartments to let in the village?" she asked.

The woman regarded her with puzzled curiosity, then she slowly and deliberately counted out the change. Barbara suddenly remembered a comparison drawn by a school medical officer she had once known. "Round London," he had said, "if I want to ask my way, I just shout out as I drive along. The answer always comes before I'm out of earshot. In Essex I generally stop the car. In Norfolk I stop the engine—it saves petrol." She felt more certain than ever that Bacle was going to be a restful place.

"Mebbe Hockings could taake ye," the woman replied in a gentle sing-song. "They do taake visitors in holiday time. There were a party there in August. But it's haarvist coming soon an' the children an' all, she'll be fair driven with the work. But mebbe it's worth yer while to try. She's a good soul, is Mistriss Hocking."

The woman came to the door and pointed up the road to a tumble-down blacksmith's shop. "Follow the lane behind the smith," she said.

Hocking's farm was at the end of a long lane deeply scarred with cart ruts and fragrant with the aftermath of summer. It was a low rambling place with farm buildings and dwelling house blending in harmonious confusion—the sort of farm which suggests irreverent cocks and shaven priests, osculatory tramps and forlorn milkmaids, docile cows and impertinent dogs.

Barbara knocked at the door, and it was opened by a stout, homely woman whose tanned face bore ample testimony to an open-air, wholesome life.

Yes, she had a room; and, if Barbara was willing to accept the simple hospitality of the farm, the good woman

would be pleased to have her as long as she wanted to stay. The terms were moderate, and Barbara signified her willingness to share the common board. An experienced medical eye informed her that the youngest Hocking had not yet been promoted to dietetic independence—the ample bosoms and loosely fastened blouse of the excellent housewife indicated liberality and promptitude. Barbara was not surprised to find that Ebenezer James Hocking was a healthy infant. Nor was she surprised, after passing through the kitchen, with its gleaming pans and spotless china, to find herself in a bedroom, swept and garnished, with window widely opened to the soft autumn breeze. There was nothing mean or stuffy about her hostess.

Barbara looked at the bed, with its white coverlet, and realized that at last she could sleep in peace, forgetful of the night-bell and of the perils which threatened her. There was only one more thing for her to do, but it would be folly to attempt it in her present condition—she must forget her fears and nerve herself for the final effort.

Two days after Barbara's departure Inspector Rose called at the Vicarage. He was obviously perturbed. Could he see Dr. Barbara Elder? Kate interviewed him, and told him that Barbara had gone away into the country. The Inspector was relieved to hear that her movements had been kept secret—that nobody knew where she had gone. He extracted a promise, however, that Kate would inform him directly her daughter returned home.

The lust to kill is universal in the animal world, and centuries of so-called civilization have failed to eradicate the tendency, though they may somewhat have modified the process. Nature, red in tooth and claw, has implanted the instinct in her children, and river and sea, moor and fen, minister to the blood-lust of man—*Homo sapiens*, the lord of creation—and contribute to the variety of his sporting instincts. The spoils of the chase are a legitimate basis for exaggeration and self-glorification—terms of humility find

no place in the retrospective vocabulary of the ardent sportsman.

The warm sun of an early autumn shone on wooded slopes and sheltered valleys. It peeped in through the narrow casements of peasants' cottages, and poured, in generous measure, through the mullioned windows of court and mansion—and brave men and gentle women stretched their limbs in the satisfied repletion of an excellent breakfast, and congratulated one another that it was a good day to kill. But the plump partridge, as it sunned its sombre plumage, did not realize that it was a good day to be killed.

The sun passed in leisurely splendour across the blue dome and dipped towards the western horizon in deepening shades of orange and crimson. Barbara was resting from her labours. The great reaper had almost completed its work. In an ever-diminishing circle it executed its appointed task—soon the large field would pay its tribute to the season's work in shocks of golden corn, ranged in orderly rows across the broad expanse of stubble.

There is a hush of expectancy amongst the men and boys gathered around the magic circle: the dogs whimper and strain at their leads. A brown smudge darts from the golden circle, another . . . then another. The guns crack, the dogs are loose, sticks thud. Over they go! little bundles of fur, with ears and legs sticking out, fantastically, here and there. They squeal and run . . . but the dogs get them. And the children shriek with excitement and clap their hands.

One has got through its ring of tormentors—away it goes across the field . . . The dogs are after it—that long, lean fellow will get it . . . there is a crack . . . it rolls over . . . up again and on for a few yards—and the dog has it.

Barbara got up, picked up her sun-bonnet, and turned down the lane which led to the farm snuggling amongst the trees.

Of course they were only vermin and could do a great deal of damage, but somehow, she wished that little chap

had escaped. It was difficult to reconcile this bloody business with the calm life of that remote farm, with its jovial, kindly host and his gentle wife. Even the children seemed to take a pleasure in this, the culminating joy of harvest time.

"Praise God, from whom all blessings flow,
Praise Him, all creatures here below."

They would all be singing their doxology of praise at the humble family prayers to-night, and probably not one of them would realize their inconsistency—"All creatures" might include dogs, even cats . . . but rabbits—vermin—that would be going too far.

She went to the dairy. The great churns were revolving slowly . . . plash . . . plash, as her hostess bustled to and fro on the busy routine of her daily life. She had no delusions or inhibitions—there were hungry men to feed and fend for, there was butter to make, there were children to bear and look after. Little time to grieve or worry with so much to be done! They went into the house together and, as they passed through the porch, the mother stooped to kiss the small, pink foot that kicked in helpless joviality at a green gas balloon suspended over the wicker cradle.

"Eight months," she said, with pride. "Eight months, my dear, and never so good."

Barbara sighed. "You are a lucky woman, Mrs. Hocking; the simple things count."

"The children are good, an' he's a good man, my dear. It's love that makes life worth living. Not but what he's tetchy and troublesome whiles: men're like that. They're different from us somehow—more easily lifted and more easily cast down, an' we must bear wi' 'em. It's good to feel they can't do without us—just gert children, an' they turn to us in trouble."

Barbara realized that all her learning was as folly in the light of the wisdom of this simple woman. Complexity is the conceit of fools, and civilization has fostered such

conceit until the world is like to perish before the momentum of its own advance. Titanic forces have been unleashed—vast, uncontrollable—and man stands helpless on the brink of disaster. Here, amidst the simplicities of life, Barbara Elder was conscious of those primitive desires which are the arbiters of human destiny—she was conscious of a vague regret for something which had hitherto eluded her.

The days went by and still she remained at the farm, helping in the daily work and sharing, for the first time, the true happiness of united home life. The children loved her; she was not Barbara Elder, M.D., but just a jolly playfellow, and, for Mrs. Hocking, a very real help at a busy time. Her face was tanned by the sun, her hair followed the decrees of Nature, she breathed the pure country air, and her form expanded to something more generous and womanly.

At times she thought of Peter—indeed he was not often far from her thoughts, for he harmonized with such surroundings—he had always been an apostle of the cold bath and the simple life.

The baby became more difficult. Teeth were peeping through the pink gums, nights were disturbed and Mrs. Hocking was feeling the strain of her work—the candle was burning at both ends.

"He sleeps little, poor darling," she said, one morning, in answer to Barbara's inquiry. But of herself she said nothing.

"Would you let me have him for a few hours each night?" Barbara asked. "It will give you both a chance of sleeping and make the work easier during the day. I know all about children and I love the little chap."

The woman looked at her gratefully. "It seems hardly right, but it's ever so good of you."

So it was arranged, and the cradle, with Ebenezer James Hocking inside, stood beside her bed; and something, which had been asleep, awoke in the heart of Dr. Barbara Elder. Often the child cried, and she would take him

from the cradle, snuggle him against her heart, and rock him to sleep. She would gaze at the small red face, pillowed on the white fullness of her bosom, and dream of a future which had no connection with the practice of medicine. "It's purely a matter of endocrines," said the doctor within. "But it's rather nice," said the true Barbara, "and I think it is time I wrote to Peter and finished my investigations."

The next day she borrowed a sheet of note-paper and envelope, and wrote to Peter.

DEAR PETER,

On some things I am beginning to agree with you. Also I have certain matters to which I wish you to attend. You may come and see me here, but don't tell anybody my address, and destroy this letter.

Yours affectionately,
BABS.

So Peter came to Hocking's Farm, and Barbara met him at the station.

In the orchard Ebenezer James Hocking was kicking at his gas balloon and blowing bubbles. Barbara took Peter's hand and led him to the side of the cradle.

"He's rather sweet. Isn't he, Peter?"

Peter was a lawyer; he said nothing.

"I'm going home soon," she continued. "I shall miss the little chap. Look, he's laughing!"

Peter sucked at his pipe and gazed at the pink creases which belonged to Ebenezer James Hocking.

"That's wind," he said. "You've often told me so."

She stamped her foot and Ebenezer crowed.

"I shall be cross with you in a minute, Peter. Why don't you say something nice?"

"Because, my dear, there is nothing more to be said. You hate sentiment, so I must needs hold my peace."

"Just for five minutes you may forget all the nasty things I have said in the past. My education started with

Miss Muffet and it has been completed by Ebenezer James Hocking."

Peter fumbled in his pocket.

"That being so . . ." He slipped the ring over the third finger of her left hand, put his arm round her waist, and kissed her.

"Goo, goo!" gurgled Ebenezer James, with futile hilarity.

Peter kissed him and then wiped his lips.

"He's very damp," he remarked.

"How long have you got?"

"I must get back by the six o'clock train. That gives us about five hours."

"And I shall be returning on Monday week. I want you to make some very special arrangements for that evening, but we can talk about that later. Come indoors and be introduced to Mrs. Hocking—she's a dear."

During the afternoon Barbara outlined her plan of campaign and Peter took copious notes.

"You are playing with fire, my dear. Why can't you tell the police what you have told me, and leave it to them? After all it's their job."

"The police were rather rude to me once, and I'm not going to risk it again. If this succeeds, the case is complete, and I don't mind who finishes it off. If it will give you any satisfaction you may tell Inspector Rose the date of my return, and that I will see him on Tuesday morning at half-past ten, if there is anything definite to report."

"You are a self-willed kid; you always were."

"Don't worry, dear. I never believed in compromises or half-measures. It works both ways—you will have no cause for complaint once I have said that fatal word 'obey'. Or shall we leave it out? I believe it is quite fashionable to do so nowadays. It seems a terrible thing to think how many people commence their married life with a lie on their lips—such a whopper too! The prayer-book has quite a lot to answer for, what with the Thirty-Nine Articles, the Athanasian Creed, and the Marriage Service."

"I'm not worrying, Babs. You won't break your word. With all your faults you never told lies."

"I hope I can live up to you, Peter. It's rather terrible to marry an idealist."

"Don't worry. I know you pretty well: I'm not expecting too much."

She pouted. "Peter, you are a beast!"

"Oh, well," he protested, "illusions make a bad start for married life—I want *you* so I don't expect perfection. You see, Joanna Shields was otherwise engaged, so I had to be content with what I could get. Haynes is now teaching her golf, and even *she* can't keep her eye on the ball; it's a sore trial to him."

"Oh, bother golf!"

"Hush, my dear. Don't be profane. You mustn't treat sacred subjects with such levity. I expect sound views on golf from my wife."

"Shall I have to play, Peter?"

"No, my dear, women golfers develop thick ankles, a bad temper, and a masculine outlook."

"I'm supposed to have the last two already."

"Never mind, the ankles are all right, and extremities are so important to a woman. One can always judge a woman by her hands and feet, that's why gloves and shoes are so fearfully expensive."

Barbara gazed at her hands. "They are rather on the large side," she said.

"Capable," he remarked. "I always look upon your hands as a passport to future happiness."

"And my feet?"

"A good understanding."

Before Peter went away he kissed Ebenezer James Hocking.

"Thanks, old chap," he said.

Ebenezer blew bubbles.

CHAPTER XII

THE CRUCIAL TEST

"REALLY, Kate," said George Elder, "you are most mysterious. Suddenly, without any apparent rhyme or reason, you decide to arrange a party for Monday week; moreover, you invite what I may call 'a mixed grill'—ha! ha! A very mixed grill!"

He glanced down the list.

"The Admiral, Lady Ballis, young Tony Larkin, that Tingley girl, Lady Inglemere, Henry Judson, the Hodgson boy, and little Annette, Roderick Haynes, Peter, and the Miss Pratts. What on earth do you intend to do with such a mixture? Half of them would like to play kiss-in-the-ring, the other half to talk politics and smoke a good cigar. Then, to add to the confusion, that madcap Barbara hopes to return 'some time' during the evening—at least so you tell me. Why must the girl do everything mysteriously? Why couldn't she say the train, and be met like any ordinary mortal?"

Kate took his hand—he certainly had reason on his side.

"We all take advantage of your good nature, dear." She meant it—Kate Elder did not treasure old grievances, and George was now a very different man to live with.

The Archdeacon beamed on her.

"In some ways, Kate, you can be very diplomatic—you might have been a politician, only you are too honest."

He gazed complacently at his gaitered legs and smiled—life had been very congenial lately.

Kate herself was mystified, but she had been absolutely loyal to Barbara, and Peter had brought some very detailed directions. It was good to hear that the girl was fit and strong again, but Kate felt that she would be very glad when Barbara resumed a normal existence—her final words

had been very disturbing: "You'll have to take on trust, mum, anything which may happen; in a few weeks, if all's well, I will tell you everything."

What was Barbara doing? And why was she hiding herself away in the country? Peter had not thrown any light upon the mystery; indeed, he had made it more obscure, for mystery seemed to be very remote from the simple life which he had described in his picture of Hocking's farm. But Peter had told her more than that, and Kate was feeling happy about the future. It had always been her ambition to see Peter and Barbara married; they were so well suited to one another physically, and she hoped that his stability would balance the girl's erratic tendencies. She had never studied eugenics, but every mother is an instinctive eugenicist, and Kate dreamt of the future. Then she remembered her promise to Inspector Rose, and went to the telephone.

Inspector Rose took up the receiver. "Hallo . . . yes . . . yes . . . oh! Monday evening? . . . yes . . . yes . . . Then I'll expect her on Tuesday morning . . . ten-thirty . . . good!"

His pawn was returning and, unless his instincts were all wrong, the next move should trap the knave. And she would make that move on Monday evening . . . Tuesday morning . . . twelve hours . . . ah!

It was quite out of order, most unorthodox; but every craftsman had his tools, and, by Jove, he'd chosen a sharp one. Of course Bucket disagreed—he always disagreed with anything which was out of the ordinary routine—he was tied to books and ledgers, and hated anybody interfering.

Said Bucket: "Herbert Rose, if that female sawbones brings it off you'll be the laughing-stock of the Force."

Inspector Rose chuckled, but his hilarity was not altogether free from anxiety, for he was playing a dangerous game, and if anything went wrong . . . still, she was a self-willed girl and, after all, she was only a pawn.

Inspector Rose went to see Anitra Gerstein and they had a game of chess. She castled early and he attacked vindictively with a phalanx of pawns.

"Good Heavens, Uncle Inspector!" said Anitra. "Give us a chance! You've never done that before."

"No," he replied. "We live and learn."

Professor Gerstein looked up from the journal he was reading.

"Yes," he murmured, "the police are very efficient. We ought to be more proud of our Police Force. They even send policemen from other countries to study our methods."

Inspector Rose did not sleep well that night. It may have been—it probably was—the crab which they had for supper. He was very fond of crab; it had never disagreed with him before, and Ellen always bought it from the same fishmonger—a most reliable man. But the fact remains that Inspector Rose of Scotland Yard had nightmare.

He was sitting on a post, with his knees drawn up to his chin, surrounded by water, in a subterranean cavern. All around him played a green light—it revealed the slimy, oozing roof of the horrible place; it flickered on the oily surface of the foul water; it illuminated other posts sticking up here and there in the gloom. Suddenly it focused itself upon one spot almost at his feet; and, as he gazed, bubbles arose from the black depths, and a white, still form came slowly to the surface. It was a naked body. Fearfully, he stretched out a foot and turned it over. It was the corpse of a woman, and the face, with open mouth and staring eyes, was the face of Barbara Elder.

With a start he awoke.

"What is it, Bert?" asked a drowsy voice at his side.

"Good Lord! What a beastly dream!" said Inspector Rose. "I believe I'm developing cold feet."

"Well, you've still got me," said Ellen.

The Inspector drew her to him. "I always was a good 'un at giving advice," he murmured, as he dropped off to sleep again.

The Archdeacon had his own way about dinner. "If you are going to victimize men like Fustian-Hall and Henry Judson, my dear, we'll prime them up with a good dinner first. The others are coming at 8.30; we will have dinner at seven o'clock, which will allow time for a cigar and a chat before they arrive."

"All right, dear," said Kate. Of course it would double the work, for they were to have refreshments at ten o'clock, and she had hoped to do with a cold supper. Men never think of things like that. She could rely on cook, and Emily would be able to help Mrs. Bishop—lucky that she could always count upon her staff.

Everybody had accepted except Roderick Haynes who had an important meeting for that evening. Kate had reinforced her invitations by a verbal hint, here and there, that it was to celebrate her husband's preferment. Her conscience rather pricked her, for she was essentially honest and in this case she was acting entirely under Barbara's instructions—and she had not the faintest idea what it was all about. Presumably Peter knew, for he had conveyed instructions; but, if so, he had given her no hint.

"I don't think, George, I should say anything about Barbara's proposed return," said Kate. "She may be very tired and want to go to bed."

The Archdeacon looked at her curiously.

"More mysteries," he remarked. "That girl is not conducive to a peaceful existence. I shall be glad when she makes up her mind to settle down to some definite and useful work."

"Perhaps she will soon."

Kate pulled down his venerable head and whispered in his left ear.

"No!" he exclaimed. "That is good news. Peter will keep her in order."

The dinner-party was small and select. Admiral Fustian-Hall, Lady Inglemere, Henry Judson, Lady Ballis and Peter had been invited; but Peter was only coming if

Barbara had returned in time. As it happened she had not. The Admiral sat next to Kate, and Henry Judson was delivered into the hands of Lady Inglemere. Kate knew that she was quite safe, for Maimie was a gossip, albeit a foolish one, and Henry Judson loved to hear what people were doing. It was rough on George, for Lady Ballis was a bore, but she was a generous supporter of the Church, and he would be fortified by the knowledge that he was helping the good cause. It would never do to slight the lady, for she had an exalted idea of her own importance and rumour whispered that she readily transferred her allegiance.

From scraps of conversation, which penetrated reminiscences of aboriginal races, cannibals, and shipwrecks, Kate gathered that everything was going smoothly.

" . . . A new body, dark green finish . . . I always favour dark colours . . . most suitable for the sweeping lines of their new model. Don't you agree, Archdeacon? . . . She's a perfect darling . . . but it was very shocking . . . they *do* say . . . still one can forgive a great deal to anyone as wealthy as she is . . . absolutely rolling in money!

" . . . We were stranded . . . positively marooned for ten days. . . . Of course, we had tinned stuff . . . doesn't agree with me . . . I suppose I am now reaping the whirlwind. . . . "

And the Admiral attacked half a lobster with enthusiasm. Kate smiled. Hobby-horses! We all ride them to death, even the best of us, and the Admiral was a dear. But the really popular person is the one who can become enthusiastic over other people's hobby-horses—the good listener with a happy knack of intelligent interjection. Kate was a good listener.

The Admiral gazed at her with appreciation.

"You are looking more charming than ever," he said gallantly.

Her curly hair, clear complexion and white skin provided no clue to age. Wrinkles are the curse of the humorous and emotional—excessive jocularly or bad temper stamp

themselves indelibly on the face. Kate Elder possessed a temperament which confers the gift of eternal youth upon its happy owner—she had too much faith to worry, too much hope to despair, too much charity to treat life with levity. She was not “fey”, and no vague forebodings of what the evening might bring forth disturbed her serenity.

After dinner the men retired to the study.

Said the Archdeacon: “Three arm-chairs, three cigars, and half an hour to enjoy them—the study is clearly indicated.”

“And afterwards?” asked the Admiral.

“Oh, there’s an entertainer, Desmond Percy—you probably know the chap, Judson; he generally puts ‘and a piano’ after his name.”

“He’s excellent.”

“Well, if he’s good you must thank Kate. I had never heard of him.”

At half-past eight the Admiral gazed regretfully at the butt of his cigar.

“Good staff work, Elder! A half-Corona was exactly right.”

“You are to play games after supper,” said the Archdeacon apologetically.

The Admiral patted his prominent waistcoat.

“Good Heavens! What sort of games?”

“Nothing very strenuous. Kate says that everybody enjoys dumb charades. She’s been pulling the house to pieces, collecting odds and ends for dressing-up.”

Desmond Percy kept everybody happy for over an hour. He was a man designed by Nature to be a comedian—his face was large, round, childlike and bland; in repose devoid of expression, but in action covering the whole range of human emotions. He could sing a comic song which left his audience in a state of helpless hilarity, with streaming eyes and aching ribs; or he could beguile the sentimental to furtive tears with some simple little ballad of everyday

life. He could make the piano rock under his powerful hands, or could wheedle out of it the murmur of falling water or the whisper of rustling leaves.

And, all the time, Kate felt like a conspirator, for there was something behind all this mummery, something she could not understand, something which Barbara had ordained.

And Barbara had arrived: she was upstairs, putting on an evening frock.

During supper Kate announced casually that Barbara had returned—she was tired, but hoped to come down for the charades.

Tony Larkin said: "Good egg!" He was fond of Barbara and intensely jealous of Peter. Peter looked self-conscious, for he possessed a secret which would have to be divulged soon, but not to-night—the ring had been temporarily removed.

There is a special spirit of good-fellowship which clings to the performance of dumb charades. Everybody possesses a sneaking conviction that, given the chance, he could have been an actor; and most people have retained their childish delight in dressing-up. Even at middle-age a man will don a grotesque head-dress and furtively peep in the nearest mirror to contemplate the result, when he is relieved of self-consciousness by the knowledge that other people are doing the same thing. The Venerable Archdeacon insisted upon his rights as host, and Kate took the other side. All sorts of things would be required, somebody who knew the house would have to be in control, and Barbara was too tired after her long journey.

They tossed for first choice and picked sides. The Archdeacon had in his team the Admiral, Lady Ballis, Peter, and four others; Kate chose as her nucleus Henry Judson, Lady Inglemere, and Annette Hyam, who was a budding actress and a most versatile young lady. Barbara said she would rather not play, but if either side wanted extra assistance she would join in. The fun became fast and furious and the acting was of a high standard. The

Admiral was in turn a chef, a pirate and a dustman; whilst Henry Judson, clad in an ancient nightgown, belonging to his host, married Tony Larkin to Annette Hyam, and subsequently suffered the extremities of sea-sickness with a realism which earned much applause.

It was the last charade, and Kate's side was out of the room. Kate whispered a word to Tony Larkin.

"Excellent!" he said. "Morphia. *More*—Oliver Twist demanding extra rations. *Fear*—a ghost scene . . . that'll suit you, Annette . . . *Morphia* . . . hm . . . we shall need Dr. Barbara to make that O.K."

So Henry Judson ladled out soup to Annette, dressed in abbreviated shorts and a khaki shirt, taken from the scouts' property box upstairs, whilst the rest formed a chorus of emaciated pauper children.

The ghost scene was so realistic that nobody was surprised when Annette was removed in an improvised strait-waistcoat to the nearest lunatic asylum. Amidst loud applause they returned once more to the dining-room to prepare for the final scene.

"We want a patient for this scene," said Kate, and she looked at Henry Judson.

"I don't feel ill," he protested, "but if Miss Hyam is going to nurse me, it will be a privilege to suffer for the good cause."

A mattress was dragged on to the stage and Henry Judson was fittingly bestowed thereupon.

Annette summoned Barbara. "You've got to be a doctor," she said. "Get your hypodermic syringe—he's in terrible agony, something must be done to relieve him."

Barbara put on a white coat, and fetched her syringe, whilst Annette dressed up as a hospital nurse.

"Do your best to soothe him, dear," said Barbara.

She proceeded to the improvised ward, followed by the nurse and attendant clerks and dressers. Annette knelt down beside the sick man, turned his face towards her and proceeded to bathe his forehead with a liberal supply of Kate's best eau-de-cologne. The spirit was willing, but

her knowledge of the art of nursing was strictly limited. Barbara gently unfastened the link of the left cuff and slipped up the shirt sleeve. Then she applied the syringe, but her hand was shaking so much that she could scarcely hold the small instrument.

Suddenly Henry Judson sat up and grasped his sleeve. For a moment he looked full into Barbara's eyes, then everybody clapped—"Morphia," said the Archdeacon.

The Admiral and Henry Judson left the house together.

"A most delightful evening, Mrs. Elder," said Henry Judson. "It takes me back to the days of my youth."

The Admiral gallantly kissed her hand: "Dear lady, you are superb, you radiate youth and happiness. We shall all remember this evening."

For some time after everybody had gone Kate and George Elder sat, hand in hand, talking. The evening had been a great success, there could be no possible doubt about that. But Kate was puzzled; for Barbara had merely said: "I'm tired, mum, I think I'll go to bed."

The Archdeacon went to the window and fastened the catch.

"I think we'd better turn in," he said.

They were half-way upstairs when the telephone bell rang. Kate went down again and took up the receiver.

"Yes. . . . This is Kensington 3205 . . . yes. . . . Who? . . . Oh . . . Dr. Porter . . . who? Mary . . . spell it . . . Maferty . . . dying . . . I am sorry . . . yes . . . I will tell her at once."

She went up to Barbara's room—the girl was half-undressed.

"Babs dear, I'm so sorry, Miss Muffet is dying. Dr. Porter has just rung up to say she wants to see you. He is sending a car in half an hour's time."

"Poor kid! I'd almost forgotten her during the last three or four weeks," said Barbara.

Half an hour later she was on her way to Whitechapel. Her mind was in a turmoil, and she tried to compose her

thoughts. How could she give of her best to a dying child in her present condition?

The car pulled up. She tapped on the front window.

"This is not the right house."

The man got down and opened the door. He had something white in his hand.

"This is the address they gave me, miss"—and he leaned forward.

The next moment a hand seized her by the throat, and a handkerchief saturated with chloroform was forced over her face. . . . She struggled . . . but every breath was increasing her helplessness. There were noises all around her . . . lights darted before her eyes . . . and that was all.

CHAPTER XIII

THE POISON RING

WHEN Barbara Elder recovered consciousness she realized that she was cold. It had not been a cold night . . . the bedclothes must have slipped off. She tried to move her right arm . . . it was fixed—fastened apparently to the frame of the bed . . . the left arm too, and both legs. She wriggled her body, and experienced an intolerable sense of constriction—there was a slipknot around her waist. She realized that she was naked except for a thin sheet thrown lightly over her body. She had been trapped, and so neatly that the possibility had never even occurred to her. For once she had under-estimated the ability of the man she was trying to catch. She was not gagged, so probably there was no chance of anybody hearing her if she shouted.

She listened—it must be near the river, for she could hear the sirens of boats . . . quite close . . . and—yes, just below the window, the splash of water lapping against brickwork. Probably some deserted dwelling or warehouse down by the river.

What was going to happen to her? Unfortunately that did not admit of many alternatives; the man was a murderer, and she had found him out. Now, she was absolutely at his mercy, and he had proved himself to be devoid of any such quality. The rope was cutting into her left leg and causing intense pain. She turned her head and saw a faint patch of light on her left, which was evidently a window.

There was a creaking noise behind her head—somebody was slowly opening the door. The light of a lantern glimmered on the cobwebbed ceiling, and Henry Judson stood by her side—he was still wearing evening clothes.

"Ah," he said. "So you have come round. There is no need for any formal introduction; we are old friends—such old friends that it grieves me to think that we must part so soon." He patted her on the arm. "Your father and mother too: I will be a friend to them in their bereavement . . . they shall never know the truth. There is always the hope of uncertainty—it softens the blow . . . 'missing' had always an element of consolation during the Great War—the possibility of something less than death. Of course, they will find out that Dr. Porter did not send for you. Miss—what do you call her?—Muffet has been very useful to me. You may remember that you told me all about her at the opening of the Hall. I have always cultivated a good memory. . . . Ah! The Hall. I was indiscreet there; obviously you were suspicious of my eyesight. And to-night again! You clever little devil! I did not know that you had heard of that scar. The fat fool found out more than I gave him credit for. A dangerous game, Miss Barbara, to play with a man like me, for I strike quickly, like a snake. But, like a snake too, I know how to wait."

She gazed at him in terror. "What are you going to do?" she asked, in a voice that was little more than a whisper.

"There is no hurry. You are a very inquisitive young lady, and I am going to satisfy your curiosity—to tell you all about it. Then I am going to demonstrate my methods, this time somewhere where the bruise will not show—

that is why you have been stripped. Then you will go through that window into the river, with the outgoing tide."

He went to the window and gazed at the river.

"There is no hurry. Nobody can find you here, nobody could hear you if you called. So here we are—Reuben Vetter, scientist, and Barbara Elder, doctor of medicine . . . waiting . . . for the great experiment."

She moved, and the cord cut into her lacerated leg. "Oh," she sobbed, "it's hurting!"

"Dear, dear! I have tied that one too tight, it is cutting the pretty leg."

He gently loosened the rope and replaced the sheet.

"You are cold. But that will not matter soon. Perhaps you would like to see me without my glasses; they make a great deal of difference, and you have always been so interested in my eyes. . . . So! . . . and hey presto, the philanthropist turns into the devil. That's what a friend once said I looked like without them—the devil. It flattered my pride, but I took the hint."

He sat down on the end of the bed and caressed her leg.

"Sad! Sad, to die so young, so full of promise. Waste of money! Waste of talent! But what can I do?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"You threaten my reputation, my career, my very existence. By virtue of my position—and how useful your dear father has been to me—I see things, I hear things, people trust me, they confide in me. Can you wonder that I take no risks? If danger comes to me, death is never far away . . . and it is always the other who dies—mark that, Dr. Barbara, always the other. And you—you who had every reason to know my power, to dread me, you have dared to defy me, so to threaten my existence that I, I have almost come to fear you."

His fingers dug into her flesh and she thought that he would strike her.

"I suppose it was from that fat fool that you heard about the scar. I have another just here"—he touched

his side—"perhaps you would like to see that one too; you are a doctor, so there would be no impropriety."

She gazed at him in terror.

"No? well, perhaps you are right. You have seen many like it, and it is not nearly so characteristic as the other. They have no mercy—those doctors—when a snake bites you. But I—I am merciful; my venom kills quickly and painlessly."

He walked restlessly up and down the small room—up and down . . . like a caged tiger waiting for its food.

"And Mr. Potter. That was clever of you, for I thought you had made a mistake. I nearly left you alone after that—no, not for philanthropic reasons . . . I did not want to have too many tragedies in my immediate circle of friends. Even Inspector Rose might have become suspicious. Paul Marks was quite easy and, if it hadn't been for you, Helen Heylet must have been hanged. Then my secret would never have been discovered. You are going to pay me for that to-night."

He licked his lips.

"The girl? Oh, I just pushed her in front of a bus—it was so easy. Be advised by me, Dr. Barbara; never allow your tools to outlive their usefulness. They are like old safety-razor blades, liable to cut you. But, of course, it's no use giving advice to you, unless you can take it with you to that blissful world your father is so fond of describing.

"But you do not speak to me. That is unkind when I am so expansive and sociable. Besides, I might do something worse than kill you . . . you remember that delightful play—Mr. Wu. Revenge is very good—and you have given much trouble."

He crept nearer to her.

The girl shuddered.

"No," she cried, "not that."

"No," he said, "you are right—not *that*, it is not one of my weaknesses; I suppose you doctors would call me a

megalo-maniac. I have often looked forward to this pleasant meeting, when I should have you at my mercy and be in a position to satisfy your curiosity without danger to myself. You possess, if I may say so, the great spirit and the capacity to appreciate greatness. And I am great—from a trivial scientific discovery I have derived wealth and notoriety . . . not the empty plaudits of the mob, but that higher tribute which is ever paid to the unfathomable mysteries of life.

"I am conscious of it in the street when men greet me with a friendly smile, in church when the offertory bag passes from hand to hand, in the amenities of social life. Sometimes I dread lest in a fit of exaltation I shall betray myself: often I am tempted to laugh aloud when I hear men talk with bated breath of . . . myself. Always I feel, if they only knew . . . if they only knew! But you knew, Barbara Elder, at last you found out. Once you even defeated me—that was at the trial of Helen Heylet. It was my first reverse. Now you fail!"

"I nearly succeeded again."

"Ah! you can speak? You can defy me still? We shall see."

He took a small leather case from his pocket. Inside was a massive ring.

"This," he said, "is a very rare specimen of the Anello Della Morte. You have doubtless heard of the poison rings of the Middle Ages. And here, on what you doctors would call the palmar aspect of the bezel, is the needle point through which the poison is ejected. You will note the simplicity of the device; it might have been specially invented for my concentrated venom. No physical strength is required—just a stroking movement or, perhaps, in the case of your charming sex, a gentle caress.

"If we review the cases in our joint experience you will see exactly what I mean. There was the drowning case, from which I believe you obtained your first clue. We were standing on the Embankment by the river and the man threatened me—*me* . . . he threatened *me*. I clasped his wrist to restrain him . . . and then . . . he just floated

away down the river. Paul Marks was doomed to die before I visited him that evening—a treacherous, dangerous tool, and far too sharp. If I remember rightly I was congratulating him on obtaining the pearls at the time—we were shaking hands. The stiletto, which I removed from Helen Heylet's room the day before when visiting her excellent husband, was intended to cover my tracks.

"And now we come to our third case, that of Dr. Barbara Elder."

He placed the ring on the middle finger of his right hand and like some obscene beast crept still closer to his victim.

"Just a stroking movement," he muttered, and his hand passed under the sheet . . . "or a gentle caress."

She could feel it cold against her body.

"So! . . . So! . . ."

Barbara shrieked. Again and again her cry rang through the empty building. . . .

The man laughed in unholy glee.

"No," he said. "No, it was the wrong hand; I was merely demonstrating the method. I have not chosen the place yet—the place where the bruise will not show if they ever find the body."

Once more she felt his hand passing over her bare flesh—creeping like a snake.

"Ah!" he said. And she knew that the decision had been made.

"But the tide does not turn for another quarter of an hour. We must wait. You do not mind?"

He took out his gold watch and sat upon the edge of the bed with it in his hand.

"You must forgive me," he said, "if I have been somewhat verbose. You will, I am sure, if you realize the satisfaction I have derived from this tête-à-tête. In the circumstances it is perhaps natural that you have taken but a small part in the conversation."

Barbara turned her head to one side. She could just see the window—a pale grey square in a black wall. She could

hear the water more plainly now. For fifteen minutes she watched the grey patch and listened to the restless lapping of the water. The light seemed to come and go.

"Now!" he said; and she heard the snap of his watch.

He adjusted the ring and stood up. . . . The patch of light grew suddenly dark. He took a step forward. . . .

"Hands up, Vetter," said a deep voice from the window.

At the same moment two powerful hands seized him from behind and pinioned his arms to his side. There was a short struggle . . . suddenly he gave a sharp cry . . . gasped for breath, and crumpled up in a heap at the feet of his captor.

"Too late . . . Inspector"—the words came in jerks—"he . . . closed my hand . . . the . . . ring . . . of . . . venom . . . never . . . fails." He choked. . . . There was a short spasm . . . a few convulsive movements—and Reuben Vetter had passed beyond the reach of human justice.

Inspector Rose mopped his forehead, stumbled to the edge of the bed, and flashed his lantern over the white form lying there.

"Are you hurt?"

But Barbara Elder had fainted.

"My God!" he said wildly. "Am I too late?"

His companion deliberately cut the cords and covered the girl up with the sheet. Then he removed his heavy coat and placed it over her.

"Guess she'll catch cold," he remarked, as Barbara opened her eyes.

The girl looked wildly around the room.

"Where is he?"

Rose patted her hand.

"You're safe. He's dead."

"I should take some sal volatile and quinine if I was you, Miss, when you get home," said his companion. "This ain't no place for sun-bathin'." And he shivered.

CHAPTER XIV

BARBARA RETIRES

THE girl shuddered. Even the fact that she was holding Peter's hand could not prevent that. For three days Barbara Elder had been in bed, and still she did not like to be left alone.

"How was I saved, Peter? There seemed to be no hope—and it isn't exactly a fairy story."

"There are a great many things we all want to know, dear, but Sir Henry won't hear of any explanations until you are stronger."

"I suppose he will send me away for another rest cure."

"He thinks a honeymoon will be quite sufficient, as you will have a husband to keep you in order."

He stooped over and kissed her. "You look very pretty in bed, Babs. I like that pink thingamibob with ribbons. You make quite an interesting invalid with all these flowers and things around you."

Kate came into the room with some medicine.

"If I go on with that stuff, I shall need a bridal veil to hide my pimples."

"Don't be silly, dear, you haven't got one yet."

"No, but they come very suddenly, like a shower of frogs. Has he given me much bromide? Let me see the prescription, mum."

Kate smiled at Peter. "You see she's ever so much better. As a matter of fact, dear, this is the last dose; you are to have a tonic now. Sir Henry says you are a very tough person."

"Good Lord!" said Peter. "It's horribly suggestive of one of those chickens you buy for half-a-crown and boil for umpteen hours."

"You chose me yourself, my dear. But they often turn

out quite well in the end, provided their joints are not fixed with rheumatoid arthritis."

"You promised I should have no more 'medical shop'."

"Very well, then tell me when I can see Inspector Rose. Did Sir Henry say, mum?"

"When you are eating well and sleeping peacefully."

A week later she obtained permission. The great nerve specialist fixed his monocle firmly in his right eye and gazed at her sternly.

"You are a very persistent young lady," he grumbled, "but I don't think that it can do any harm now. A pity you are going to be married! It's good material lost to medicine—always the same with you girls—you take up the time of lecturers and demonstrators . . . then, just when you can be of use to humanity, a young man comes along, and you say 'Yes'."

"The profession is very overcrowded, and the men don't approve of us—we work too hard. Besides, Peter didn't 'come along'—he's been at it for years."

Sir Henry snorted. He was a crusty bachelor, with a fine taste in cigars and port wine.

"I expect you will make an excellent mother," he conceded. "You seem to do everything thoroughly."

"It's an important occupation," said Barbara, "or we should have no nerve specialists."

The following day Inspector Rose attended a family conference.

"Before we begin I should like to express our gratitude to you, Inspector, for saving her life," said Kate.

Barbara was on the couch by the window, Peter and Kate were in armchairs, the Archdeacon was standing by the mantelpiece. Perched on a wicker chair, with a hard felt hat wedged between his knees, was Inspector Rose. It was difficult for the Inspector to blush but, if possible, his face assumed a deeper shade of crimson. He stared

with embarrassment at his boots and was obviously at a loss for words.

The Archdeacon cleared his throat. "I too should like to associate myself with this expression of gratitude. Had it not been for your prompt intervention, Inspector, this would have been a house of desolation."

The agitation of Inspector Rose increased. "I don't know," he said. "It's rather difficult to explain, but in some ways I suppose I am to blame for what happened."

Peter looked at him with surprise. "Perhaps you had better let us have the whole story. At present we are rather in the dark."

"It all began with a chance remark made by Anitra. She said I didn't use my pawns sufficiently, and that at times they could be very useful. It suddenly occurred to me that I might use Dr. Elder to trap the criminal. She had beaten us once—in the matter of Paul Marks—and I knew that she was still on the track. From my knowledge of this man, Vetter, I was sure that if she became dangerous he would try to . . . er . . . get hold of her. In other words, by encouraging her efforts and watching her movements, I was certain sooner or later to get the man."

"I wasn't even a pawn then," said Barbara. "Just a poor wriggly worm used to bait your hook!"

"You see," he apologized, "you were not giving anything away, so we couldn't co-operate—it placed me in a very awkward position, for I was sure you possessed information which we couldn't get."

"I don't blame you, but it's rather humiliating after all the trouble I have taken."

The Archdeacon intervened with dignity: "I call it most irregular."

"Yes," said Peter, "I should be inclined to put it even more forcibly if I didn't know my future wife so well—according to her recognized standard the Official Force was bound to arrive a day late."

Barbara laughed: "And luckily they arrived in the nick

of time. You certainly win, Inspector. How did you do it?"

"You have been shadowed by two of my best men ever since I told you about my American trip and its results."

"That accounts for a good deal. Was it one of your men who saved my life on the Underground?"

"Yes, but he missed the culprit. After your return I knew that the criminal would have to act before you reported to me. That gave him twelve hours, and for those twelve hours I decided to watch your house. There were two of us, and we had a fast car round the corner. At half-past twelve I heard your telephone-bell ring; half an hour later a car drew up at the front door. After you got in, it proceeded at a moderate speed towards the East End. We followed in the Bentley, keeping some distance behind, as I feared we should lose the ringleader if we foreclosed prematurely. That was our undoing, for, in a maze of streets down by the river, we lost the other car.

"Half an hour later we found it again, abandoned by some tumbledown warehouses at the water's edge. There was no indication as to which way the occupants had gone, but a smell of chloroform still hung about the interior of the car, and it was unlikely that they would carry an unconscious person very far.

"Fifty yards away we found this"—he produced a small tortoiseshell hair slide. "It was lying at the entrance to a large yard stacked with old tins and empty petrol drums. We proceeded to search the yard. Suddenly we heard a cry which seemed to come from a derelict brick dwelling adjoining one of the largest sheds—a sort of caretaker's house. The door was locked and bolted and the windows looked over the river. There was a sort of parapet on the river side of the building. We clambered round and saw a glimmer of light coming from one of the windows. It was not an easy climb in the dark, but we managed to reach the window, as you know, at the critical moment.

"The watch episode was in progress when we arrived, and for some time we had the man covered. It was not

easy, however, to decide what to do, for Dr. Elder was also in the line of our fire. Then Vetter got up, and it was necessary for us to get a move on. It was unfortunate in some ways that the man closed his hand when my chap collared him. It would have been a most interesting trial."

"My God!" Peter exclaimed. "What an escape! You were nearly too late."

The Inspector mopped his forehead.

"It's been a lesson to me. That half-hour! I wouldn't go through that again for a fortune. But we got our man all right, and we caught him in the act. Perhaps Dr. Elder will be able to fill in some of the gaps, for I confess that I am in the dark with regard to her methods."

"Surely, Inspector, the fisherman does not ask the luckless worm how it lured the fish on to his hook. Nor does the chess expert consult his pawn with regard to the plan of campaign."

"No. But my pawn reached the last square and became a queen. I crave the forgiveness and indulgence of Her Gracious Majesty."

Peter relaxed.

"You are a diplomatist, Inspector. It would be a shame to criticize your methods. High honours await you in the future."

"I don't know about honours. I was on the verge of failure if it hadn't been for Dr. Elder. They might have fulfilled the prognostications of my friend Bucket, and put me in charge of the lost property office."

Peter looked at the girl.

"Now, Babs, what about it?"

"There was a good deal of luck; I suppose there always is in such cases. From the very first I was convinced that Paul Marks had been killed by somebody who knew the Heylets. The police theory, that the stiletto might have been picked up or stolen from Helen in the man's flat seemed absurd—possibly they never really believed it themselves. By a process of elimination I arrived at James

Potter, and subsequent investigations seemed to justify my suspicions. As it happened, he was not the man we were after, and I wasted a good deal of time before I found that out.

"There were two points of great importance which I wanted to clear up for I felt that they might be a direct indication of the criminal. One of them was a personal matter of which the police could have no knowledge. I had persuaded Helen to have nothing more to do with Paul Marks—you may remember, Peter, an interview I had with you on this matter. She gave me her promise and for two or three weeks kept it faithfully. Then, suddenly, she resumed her association with the man. I was most anxious to find out what had induced her to break her word to me.

"The result of this investigation was inconclusive.

"Helen had returned to Paul Marks in a fit of temper because Aubrey had taxed her unfairly with visiting the man at his flat—her pride was wounded and she adopted this means of revenge. Knowing Aubrey, it was obvious that somebody must have stirred him up to take action."

The girl hesitated.

"I am afraid I was the guilty party," said the Archdeacon.

"You may remember, dad, that I asked you who had told you that she was visiting his flat."

"Yes, I'm sorry, dear. I refused to tell you."

"You said you had it from a reliable source."

"The second point I wanted to ascertain was how Paul Marks got an introduction to Lady Inglemere. Here, again I failed to get any satisfaction. Lady Inglemere, as one would expect, could not remember; but Jane Hubbar had an entry in her diary which showed that he was introduced casually, in Paris, as a member of a small travel club—'The Plovers'.

"Both episodes opened up fresh possibilities; for Henry Judson was notoriously interested in other people's affairs."

